Strengthening Social Security for the 21st Century

FEBRUARY 2005

The Problems Facing Social Security

"One of America's most important institutions – a symbol of the trust between generations – is also in need of wise and effective reform. Social Security was a great moral success of the 20th Century, and we must honor its great purposes in this new century. The system, however, on its current path, is headed toward bankruptcy. And so we must join together to strengthen and save Social Security."

President George W. Bush
State of the Union Address
February 2, 2005

- **A Social Security System designed for a 1935 world does not fit the needs of the 21st Century.** Social Security was designed in 1935 for a world that is very different from today. In 1935, most women did not work outside the home. Today, about 60% of women work outside the home. In 1935, the average American did not live long enough to collect retirement benefits. Today, life expectancy is 77 years. (*2004 Report of the Social Security Trustees,* p. 81).

- **Social Security will not be changed for those 55 or older (born before 1950).** Today, more than 45 million Americans receive Social Security benefits and millions more are nearing retirement. For these Americans, Social Security benefits are secure and will not change in any way.

- **Social Security is making empty promises to our children and grandchildren.** For our younger workers, Social Security has serious problems that will grow worse over time. Social Security cannot afford to pay promised benefits to future generations because it was designed for a 1935 world in which benefits were much lower, life-spans were shorter, there were more workers per retiree, and fewer retirees were drawing from the system.

- **With each passing year, there are fewer workers paying ever-higher benefits to an ever-larger number of retirees.** Social Security is a pay-as-you-go system, which means taxes on today's workers pay the benefits for today's retirees. A worker's payroll taxes are not saved in an account with his or her name on it for the worker's retirement.

    - **There are fewer workers to support our retirees.** When Social Security was first created, there were 40 workers to support every one retiree, and most workers did not live long enough to collect retirement benefits from the system. Since then, the demographics of our society have changed dramatically. People are living longer and having fewer children. As a result we have seen a dramatic change in the number of workers supporting each

retiree's benefits. According to the *2004 Report of the Social Security Trustees* (page 47):

  - In 1950, there were 16 workers to support every one beneficiary of Social Security.
  - Today, there are only 3.3 workers supporting every Social Security beneficiary.
  - And, by the time our youngest workers turn 65, there will be only 2 workers supporting each beneficiary.

- **Benefits are scheduled to rise dramatically over the next few decades.** Because benefits are tied to wage growth rather than inflation, benefits are growing faster than the rest of the economy. This benefit formula was established in 1977. As a result, today's 20-year old is promised benefits that are 40% higher, in real terms, than are paid to seniors who retire this year. But the current system does not have the money to pay these promised benefits.

- **The retirement of the Baby Boomers will accelerate the problem.** In just 3 years, the first of the Baby Boom generation will begin to retire, putting added strain on a system that was not designed to meet the needs of the 21st century. By 2031, there will be almost twice as many older Americans as today – from 37 million today to 71 million. (http://www.ssa.gov/pressoffice/basicfact).

- **Social Security is heading toward bankruptcy.** According to the Social Security Trustees, thirteen years from now, in 2018, Social Security will be paying out more than it takes in and every year afterward will bring a new shortfall, bigger than the year before. And, when today's young workers begin to retire in 2042, the system will be exhausted and bankrupt. (*Summary of the 2004 Annual Report of the Social Security Trustees*, p. 1). If we do not act now to save it, the only solution will be drastically higher taxes, massive new borrowing, or sudden and severe cuts in Social Security benefits or other government programs.

- **As of 2004, the cost of doing nothing to fix our Social Security system had hit an estimated $10.4 trillion, according to the Social Security Trustees**. (*2004 Report of the Social Security Trustees*, p. 58). The longer we wait to take action, the more difficult and expensive the changes will be.

  - $10.4 trillion is almost twice the combined wages and salaries of every working American in 2004.

  - Every year we wait costs an additional $600 billion. (*2004 Report of the Social Security Trustees*, p. 58).

  - Today's 30-year-old worker can expect a 27% benefit cut from the current system when he or she reaches normal retirement age. (*2004 Report of the Social Security Trustees*, p. 8). And, without action, these benefit cuts will only get worse.

Strengthening Social Security Permanently

"We must pass reforms that solve the financial problems of Social Security once and for all."

President George W. Bush
State of the Union Address
February 2, 2005

- **In the State of the Union Address, President Bush called for an open, candid review of the options to strengthen Social Security permanently for our children and grandchildren.**

- **The President pledged to work with Members of Congress to find the most effective combination of reforms.** Former and current Members of Congress and a former President have suggested a variety of solutions to fix Social Security permanently, including limiting benefits for wealthy retirees, indexing benefits to prices rather than wages, increasing the retirement age, discouraging early collection of retirement benefits, and changing the way benefits are calculated. All of these ideas are on the table. The President recognizes that none of these reforms would be easy and has said he will listen to anyone with a good idea to offer.

- **The President believes that we must move ahead with reform, because our children's retirement security is more important than partisan politics.**

- **In the State of the Union, the President laid out basic principles to guide reform:**

  - **We must make Social Security permanently sound, not leave it for another day.**

  - **We must not jeopardize our economic strength by raising payroll taxes** – higher taxes would slow economic growth.

    - **Increasing payroll taxes is a band-aid, not a permanent solution.** Payroll taxes have been increased more than 20 times since 1935, and we still have not fixed the problem. The Social Security payroll tax, which was once 2%, is now 12.4%. To meet the needs of the 21st century, payroll taxes would have to be raised over and over and over again on American workers, stifling economic growth and job creation. Economists calculate that under the current system, the payroll tax would have to rise to more than 18% if our children and grandchildren are to receive their scheduled benefits. (*2004 Report of the Social Security Trustees*, p. 165).

  - **We must ensure that lower income Americans get the help they need to have dignity and peace of mind in their retirement.** Any reform should maintain the system's progressivity.

- **We must guarantee that there is no change for those now retired or nearing retirement.** For those Americans 55 and older (born before 1950), nothing will change, and nobody is going to take away or change their check.

- **We must take care that any changes in the system are gradual, so that younger workers have years to prepare and plan for their future.**

- **And, we should make Social Security a better deal for younger workers through voluntary personal retirement accounts.**

Personal Retirement Accounts

"As we fix Social Security, we also have the responsibility to make the system a better deal for younger workers. And the best way to reach that goal is through voluntary personal retirement accounts."

President George W. Bush
State of the Union Address
February 2, 2005

- **The President believes personal retirement accounts must be part of a comprehensive solution to strengthen Social Security for the 21st century.**

- **Under the President's plan, personal retirement accounts would start gradually. Yearly contribution limits would be raised over time, eventually permitting all workers to set aside 4 percentage points of their payroll taxes in their accounts.** Annual contributions to personal retirement accounts initially would be capped, at $1,000 per year in 2009. The cap would rise gradually over time, growing $100 per year, plus growth in average wages.

- **Personal retirement accounts offer younger workers the opportunity to build a "nest egg" for retirement that the government cannot take away.**

    - **Personal retirement accounts provide ownership and control.** Personal retirement accounts give younger workers the opportunity to own an asset and watch it grow over time.

    - **Personal retirement accounts could be passed on to children and grandchildren.** The money in these accounts would be available for retirement expenses. Any unused portion could be passed on to loved ones. Permitting individuals to pass on their personal retirement accounts to loved ones will be particularly beneficial to widows, widowers, and other survivors. According to the non-partisan analysis by the Social Security Administration's Office of Retirement Policy, the ability to inherit personal accounts provides the largest gains to widows and other survivors.

    - **Personal retirement accounts help make Social Security better for younger workers.** A personal retirement account gives a younger worker the chance to save a portion of his or her money in an account and watch it grow over time at a greater rate than anything the current system can deliver. The account will provide money for the worker's retirement in addition to the check he or she receives from Social Security. Personal retirement accounts give younger workers the chance to receive a higher rate of return from sound, long-term investing of a portion of their payroll taxes than they receive under the current system.

- **Personal retirement accounts would be voluntary.** At any time, a worker could "opt in" by making a *one-time* election to put a portion of his or her payroll taxes into a personal retirement account.

  - Workers would have the flexibility to choose from several different low-cost, broad-based investment funds and would have the opportunity to adjust investment allocations periodically, but would not be allowed to move back and forth between personal retirement accounts and the traditional system. If, after workers choose the account, they decide they want only the benefits the current system would give them, they can leave their money invested in government bonds like those the Social Security system invests in now.

  - Those workers who do not elect to create a personal retirement account would continue to draw benefits from the traditional Social Security system, reformed to be permanently sustainable.

- **Personal retirement account options and management would be similar to that of the Federal employee retirement program, known as the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP).** A centralized administrative structure would be created to collect personal retirement account contributions, manage investments, maintain records, and facilitate withdrawals at retirement. The structure would be designed to facilitate low costs, ease of use for new investors, and timely crediting of contributions. This centralized investment structure would help minimize compliance costs for employers.

  - Contributions would be collected and records maintained by a central administrator. Similar to the TSP, private investment managers would be chosen through a competitive bidding process to manage the pooled account contributions.

  - The central administrator would answer questions from account participants and distribute periodic account statements.

  - The central administrator would also facilitate withdrawals and the purchase of annuities with account balances.

  - Like TSP, we expect participants to have easy access to investment information and to their accounts. Participants could easily check account balances and adjust investment allocations.

- **Personal retirement accounts would be invested in a mix of conservative bonds and stock funds.** Guidelines and restrictions would be put in place to provide sound investment choices and prevent individuals from spending the money in these accounts on the lottery or at the race track. Workers would be permitted to allocate their personal retirement account contributions among a small number of very broadly diversified index funds patterned after the current TSP funds.

- Like TSP, personal retirement accounts could be invested in a safe government securities fund; an investment-grade corporate bond index fund; a small-cap stock index fund; a large-cap stock index fund; and an international stock index fund.

- In addition to these TSP-type funds, workers could choose a government bond fund with a guaranteed rate of return above inflation.

- Workers could also choose a "life cycle portfolio" that would automatically adjust the level of risk of the investments as the worker aged. The life cycle fund would automatically and gradually shift the allocation of investment funds as the individual neared retirement age so that it was weighted more heavily toward secure bonds.

➢ **Personal retirement accounts would be protected from sudden market swings on the eve of retirement.** To protect near-retirees from sudden market swings on the eve of retirement, personal retirement accounts would be automatically invested in the "life cycle portfolio" when a worker reaches age 47, unless the worker and his or her spouse specifically opted out by signing a waiver form stating they are aware of the risks involved. The waiver form would explain in clear, easily understandable terms the benefits of the life cycle portfolio and the risks of opting out. By shifting investment allocations from high growth funds to secure bonds as the individual nears retirement, the life cycle portfolio would provide greater protections from sudden market swings.

➢ **Personal retirement accounts would not be eaten up by hidden Wall Street fees.** Personal retirement accounts would be low-cost. The Social Security Administration's actuaries project that the ongoing administrative costs for a TSP-style personal account structure would be roughly 30 basis points or 0.3 percentage points, compared to an average of 125 basis points for investments in stock mutual funds and 88 basis points in bond mutual funds in 2003. (*www.ici.org/issues/fee/fm-v13n5*).

- The low costs are made possible by the economies of scale of a centralized administrative structure, as well as limiting investment options to a small number of prudent, broadly diversified funds.

- Most of these administrative costs are for recordkeeping which would be done by the government, not investment management done by Wall Street. (*Report of the 1994-1996 Advisory Council on Social Security*, p. 171 & January 31, 2002 Memorandum from the Social Security Actuary in the *Final Report of the President's Commission on Social Security*, p. 19).

➢ **Personal retirement accounts would not be accessible prior to retirement**. American workers who choose personal retirement accounts would not be allowed to make withdrawals from, take loans from, or borrow against their accounts prior to retirement.

➢ **Personal retirement accounts would not be emptied out all at once, but rather paid out over time, as an addition to traditional Social Security benefits.** Under a system of personal retirement accounts, procedures would be established to govern how account balances would be withdrawn at retirement. This would involve some combination of

annuities to ensure a stream of monthly income over the worker's life expectancy, phased withdrawals indexed to life expectancy, and lump sum withdrawals. Individuals would not be permitted to withdraw funds from their personal retirement accounts as lump sums, if doing so would result in their moving below the poverty line. Account balances in excess of the poverty-protection threshold requirement could be withdrawn as a lump sum for any purpose or left in the account to accumulate interest. Any unused portion of the account could be passed on to loved ones.

- **Personal retirement accounts would be phased in.** To ease the transition to a personal retirement account system, participation would be phased in according to the age of the worker. In the first year of implementation, workers currently between age 40 and 54 (born 1950 through 1965 inclusive) would have the option of establishing personal retirement accounts. In the second year, workers currently between age 26 and 54 (born 1950 through 1978 inclusive) would be given the option and by the end of the third year, all workers born in 1950 or later who want to participate in personal retirement accounts would be able to do so.

- **The President's personal retirement account proposal is fiscally responsible.** The President's proposal is consistent with his overall goal of cutting the deficit in half by 2009. Based on analysis by the Social Security Administration Actuary, the Office of Management and Budget estimates that the President's personal retirement account proposal will require transition financing of $664 billion over the next ten years ($754 billion including interest). This transition financing will not have the same effect on national savings, and thus the economy, as traditional government borrowing. Personal retirement accounts will not reduce the pool of savings available to the markets because every dollar borrowed by the Federal government to fund the transition is fully offset by an increase in savings represented by the accounts themselves. Moreover, the transition financing for personal retirement accounts should be viewed as part of a comprehensive plan to make the Social Security system permanently sustainable. Publicly released analysis by the Social Security Administration has found that several comprehensive proposals including personal accounts would dramatically reduce the costs of permanently fixing the system. (*www.ssa.gov/OACT/solvency/index*).

- **Establishing personal retirement accounts does not add to the total costs that Social Security faces.** Personal retirement accounts effectively pre-fund Social Security benefits already promised to today's workers and do not represent a net increase in Federal obligations. The obligation to pay Social Security benefits is already there. While personal retirement accounts affect the timing of these costs, they do not add to the total amount obligated through Social Security.

Thrift Savings Plan Background

- The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a voluntary retirement savings plan offered to Federal employees, including members of Congress.

- It offers comparable benefits and features to those available to private sector employees in 401(k) retirement plans, including pre-tax contributions through convenient payroll withholding.

- The TSP currently has 3.4 million participants, and their investments have grown to $152 billion. Participants voluntarily add $1.3 billion per month in new contributions to their accounts.

- Participants have the choice to invest in any or all of five broad-based investment funds:

    - A stable value fund invested in U.S. Treasury securities
    - An index fund comprising investment grade bonds
    - Small and mid-cap stock index fund
    - Large cap stock index fund
    - International stock index fund

- These funds have the following 10-year compound annual rates of return:

Fund	Return	Real
G Fund (government securities fund)	6.04%	(3.67% real)
F Fund (bond index fund)	6.95%	(4.58% real)
C Fund (common stock index fund)	10.99%	(8.62% real)
S Fund (small capitalization stock index fund)	9.70%	(7.33% real)
I Fund (international stock index fund)	4.32%	(1.95% real)

- Beginning this summer, the TSP will offer lifecycle portfolios, each with a designated ratio of investments among the five TSP funds. This balanced, diversified portfolio will automatically reallocate as the participant's retirement date approaches.

- Administration and investment costs for the TSP are low at 6 basis points, or 60 cents per $1,000 of account balance. A Senate hearing in 2004 discovered that many "low-cost" funds have expense ratios between 20 and 65 basis points. Other funds' costs are significantly higher.

- The TSP is administered by the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board. Governance of the Board is carried out by five independent part-time Presidential appointees and a full-time Executive Director whom they select. TSP funds are held in trust. As fiduciaries, the Board Members and the Executive Director are required to act prudently and solely in the interest of TSP participants and beneficiaries.

- The Board provides training and develops educational materials including publications, forms and videos. It maintains an interactive web site (*www.tsp.gov*) and a toll free telephone center for participants to obtain these materials, check account balances, change contribution levels, adjust investment allocations or request withdrawals.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SOCIAL SECURITY

1950

16 Workers paying for every 1 Beneficiary

TODAY

3.3 Workers paying for every 1 Beneficiary

WHEN YOUNGER WORKERS RETIRE

Only 2 Workers paying for every 1 Beneficiary

COST OF INACTION
$ in Billions
$200
$0
-$200
-$400
-$600
-$800
-$1,000
CASH DEFICITS
2004
2020
2040
2060
2079