



Larry Elder

President Biden Claims GOP Wants to “Sunset” Entitlements: What About Clinton, Obama, and then-Sen. Biden?

During President Joe Biden’s State of the Union speech, he got booed after accusing “some” Republicans of seeking to “sunset” some of the so-called entitlements[SP1]. Biden said: “Instead of making the wealthy pay their fair share, some Republicans ... want Medicare and Social Security to sunset.... Anybody who doubts it, contact my office. I’ll give you a copy. I’ll give you a copy of the proposal.”

It is certainly true that President George W. Bush set up a bipartisan commission to address the long-term problem with Social Security solvency. Their 2002 report proposed allowing workers to devote a portion of their Social Security contribution to a private account to invest, for example, in the stock market for a better rate of return. The report concluded: “Social Security will be strengthened if modernized to include a system of voluntary personal accounts. Personal accounts improve retirement security by facilitating wealth creation and providing participants with assets that they own and that can be inherited, rather than providing only claims to benefits that remain subject to political negotiation.” It is also true that Bush abandoned the plan after Democrats denounced it as a “risky” scheme to “privatize Social Security.”

But it is equally true that both Democratic Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton called Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security — without reforms — “unsustainable.” As for Biden, as senator in 1975, he proposed reexamining every federal program. In a floor speech, he said, “One thing that we must do is to begin reviewing

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existing programs to determine whether they are still effective and whether they are worth the money that we are putting in them. We must eliminate the wasteful ones.” Awkward.

Obama set up a bipartisan “federal deficit commission” that made several recommendations. About its final report, ABC News wrote:

The president had tasked commission co-chairmen Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson with devising a plan to reduce the deficits and redirect the country from its “unsustainable” fiscal path... To dig the country out of debt, the plan put forth by the panel today calls for drastic changes such as raising the Social Security retirement age, making cuts to Medicare and doubling the federal gas tax. It made only minor changes to the earlier draft released by Bowles and Simpson last month.

As for Clinton, he too set a bipartisan commission to tackle the entitlements problem. The federal government’s Social Security website states: “On November 5th 1993 President Bill Clinton — by Executive Order #12878 — created the Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement Reform. The Commission — which began work in February 1994 — was co-chaired by Senators Robert Kerrey (D-NB) and John Danforth (R-MO[SP2]). The Commission was comprised of ten U.S. Senators, ten members of Congress, and twelve members of the public, along with a professional staff of 27.

In their approach, the Commission went well beyond the topics of Social Security and Medicare and lumped together everything that might be considered an “entitlement” — from welfare programs to the home mortgage interest tax deduction to the cost of federal civilian and military retirement. Its goal was to devise a package of proposals which would reduce the overall cost of all of these programs....

The two co-chairs of the Commission developed their own Social Security proposal, which featured raising the retirement age to 70, a cut in the Social Security payroll tax, with the money redirected into mandatory private accounts, and adopting price-indexing (among other changes). This was perhaps the first advocacy of “carve-out” private accounts, and of price indexing, by a prominent mainstream group.

Were those Democratic presidents, both of whom established commissions on entitlements, seeking — to use Biden’s characterization — to “sunset” these programs?

The federal budget devotes about half of its spending to the “entitlement” programs: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and Obamacare. Then there is income security, which includes general retirement and disability insurance; federal employee retirement, disability and military retirement; unemployment compensation; housing assistance; nutrition assistance; foster care; Supplemental Security Income; and the earned income and child tax credits. Throw in national security and interest on the debt and there’s almost nothing left. Both Republican and Democrat presidents concede that without reforms these programs are “unsustainable,” yet members of both parties attack reform as “risky” and “irresponsible.”

Meanwhile, the clock keeps ticking.

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