

A NEW AMERICAN REALITY

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The Social Security Act has been heralded, alike by its friends and by its critics, as something new upon the American scene. To a certain extent, this view is well taken. It is now for the United States to recognize that the risk of insecurity is Nation-wide. It is now to gauge national action against this risk in the long terms of prevention as well as of protection. It is unquestionably now for the Federal Government to make itself a party to the enterprise on such a scale.

Passed in 1935, effective in 1936, declared constitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1937, the Social Security Act is now, in 1938, an American reality. Through its operation, allowances from combined Federal, State, and local funds are going each month into hundreds of thousands of homes where there are needy persons who are aged or blind or children deprived of parental support. Public-health programs have been expanded and strengthened from coast to coast. Similar progress has been made in promoting child welfare and vocational reeducation for the handicapped. Every State in the Union has an approved unemployment compensation law covering the majority of its wage earners, and in more than half the States unemployment benefits already are being paid. And finally, through the old-age insurance program, more than 40 million accounts have been opened to record wages on which will be based lifetime monthly payments to wage earners when they are old.

There can be no question that these facts represent something very new and very real to the millions of Americans whom they concern directly and the tens of millions who, as citizens, also share in the beneficial effects of this Nation-wide program. Basically, however, neither the purposes nor the methods embodied in the Social Security Act are new. Insecurity is as old as the human race; the history of civilization might well be described as a progressive struggle to master it.

In colonial days, when life was relatively simple, welfare activities were also simple and direct. Since, in the language of the times, "labor was dear and provision cheap," need was likely to occur mainly as the result of death or other physical

disaster; and "the needy" were simply those of one's neighbors who had suffered such misfortune. A typical old town record recites, for example, that: "Whereas said Anthony is stricken blind and his wife is very ancient, by which means they are incapable of getting a living," they shall receive yearly payments for their maintenance "during either of their natural lives." Our present public-assistance program traces a direct line of descent from such early provisions. Still more directly it is the outgrowth of State-wide public-assistance provisions developed during the past 25 years.

The idea of joining forces for mutual protection has been a habit of ours throughout our history. Mutual cooperation has long been accepted as good business; and, practical men that they are, American businessmen have been its apostles. The pooling of risks through insurance is considered the epitome of economic respectability by those who can afford it. Social insurance simply extends this kind of protection to those who need it most and have been least able to obtain it.

Insofar, then, as the Social Security Act is new, it represents an extension of basic American principles from the narrow local insularity of our early public-welfare provisions to the new line-up of Federal, State, and local forces for social security today. There were legitimate reasons for the emphasis our forebears placed on local responsibility. The idea of localism lay at the foundation of the old Elizabethan "poor laws" inherited from England. It was the more easily transplanted because, in colonial America, there was no National Government nor even anything that closely resembled present-day State governments. Both the people and the government were close to the land, and in an agricultural society the local community is the main source of national wealth. Finally, there was the mere matter of distance. A township, or a county, was about as much territory as a public servant could administer—on horseback.

There may be some question whether local responsibility worked as well, even then, as its latter-day advocates would have us believe. As far back as 1735—a full 200 years before social security was accepted as a national responsibility—the town of Boston sent a petition to the Royal

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Governor of Massachusetts, protesting that the migration of needy persons from other places was burdening it with an unfair share of the current welfare load. No American of 1735 could have predicted, however, the changes which, two centuries later, were to bring that acceptance. Two hundred cities bigger than the largest metropolis of colonial days; 20 times as much occupied land; 40 times as many people; 100 times as much wealth—these are only a few measures of our growth.

When cash and wages must pass through many and widely scattered hands, when the resources of the Nation are varied and often intangible, then without question the traditional agricultural economy has been transformed and the day of exclusively local responsibility has passed. Industrial progress has given our society an unprecedented complexity, characterized by mass production, rapid transportation, and remote control in the realms of finance and of employment. We have been alert to make the most of the business advantages of this economic and social integration, but slow to take measures to forestall the human disasters that too often lie in the wake of industrial progress.

The Social Security Act has enabled us to meet some of the most urgent needs that have arisen from these changes and has laid a foundation for the prevention of future needs. This does not mean that the act is meeting—or was ever intended to meet—all our problems or that it is perfect by any measure. But, as Alexander Hamilton once said of the Constitution: "This system, though not perfect in every part, is upon the whole a good one; is the best that the present views and circumstances of the country will permit; and is such a one as promises * * * reasonable * * * security." That astute appraiser of men and nations went on to recommend that the country get down to work under the proposed system rather than "imprudently to prolong the precarious state of our national affairs * * * in the chimerical pursuit of a perfect plan." "For," said he, "I never expect to see a perfect work from imperfect man."

The majority of the American people have always regarded their democratic ideals with realism. The rapidity with which the social security program has been woven into the fabric of our lives shows that the vast majority see it as a realistic expression of those ideals—a method of safeguarding our people and our economic system by

extending those well-known protections which government has always thrown around the property of some men—their farms, their homes, their stocks and bonds—to include the only property of many more men—their opportunity for a normal childhood, their ability to work, their jobs, and their chance for a tranquil old age. Throughout our history we have exercised democratic political control to promote individual initiative in some areas and at some times, and joint action through government in other areas and at other times, depending upon which seemed most likely, under given conditions, to serve the common welfare. Yet whenever changing circumstances have compelled us to ask government to lend a hand in what were once private responsibilities, there have always been some to cry that our cherished institutions and our time-honored traditions would immediately be overthrown.

Let me quote from one of these viewers-with-alarm: "Among these strange notions, * * * there is one which has lately seized the minds of men, that all things must be done for them by the government, and that they are to do nothing for themselves. The government is not only to attend to the great concerns which are its province, but it must step in and ease individuals of their natural and moral obligations. A more pernicious notion cannot prevail. Look at that ragged fellow staggering from the whiskey shop, and see that slattern who has gone there to reclaim him; where are their children? Running about ragged, idle, ignorant, fit candidates for the penitentiary. Why is all this so? Ask the man and he will tell you, 'Oh, the government has undertaken to educate our children for us. It has given us a premium for idleness * * *.' The education of their children is the first and most obvious duty of every parent. Is it the friends of the poor who absolve them from what Nature, what God himself has made their first and most sacred duty?"

That is what John Randolph, of Virginia, thought and said in 1829 about the then "revolutionary" institution of public education. It parallels what a few people thought and said in 1935 about the social security program. Yet in these 3 years that program, like public education, has become an accepted and practical reality. Building on their past, but looking at the present and toward the future, the Federal Government, the States, and the localities stand shoulder to shoulder to promote individual and national security.