

Commissions: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly



Demystifying the Deficit, Social Security Finances, and Commissions

Eric Kingson
Professor
School of Social Work
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York 13244
erkingso@syr.edu
315-374-8338

This paper



**Draws on the experience of two
commissions to assess the likelihood of
success of the Conrad-Gregg Proposal**

- 1982 National Commission on Social Security Reform
- 1994 Bipartisan Commission on Entitlements & Tax Reform

But first a story about David Stockman

Proposed Conrad-Gregg Fast Track Commission

Not clear what is really on the table

But Social Security & Medicare are for sure

18 Commission members

Treasury Secretary and one Presidential Appointment

16 members of Congress, appointed by D & R leaders

Reports after 2010 mid-term elections

If 14 members agree, up or down vote on package
(without amendments) requiring 3/5 majority in House
and Senate

By-passes normal congressional processes

Debt-ceiling threat by proponents

SIMILARITIES IN 1982 & 1994

- 
- Origins centered around presidential and congressional politics
 - Superficially, similar structure and subjects
 - High profile commissions
 - Ably staffed
 - Mid-term elections played important role
 - Both gained consensus on existence of a problem

DIFFERENCES

Changed political context

No short-term crisis

Presidential support

Orientation of staff

Bounded vs. expansive scope

Traditional vs. neoconservative assumptions
about Social Security

Political negotiation vs. marketing

Analysis vs. market research

Outcomes

COMMISSIONS



What do they do?

- deflect blame
- define or obfuscate problems
- sometimes facilitate governance

Likelihood of success enhanced by

- substantial presidential & congressional backing
- real crisis
- agreement on key facts
- internal compromise
- absence of legislators who want to block recommendations
- absence of organized groups committed to policy outcomes
- utilizing the normal legislative channels



“It is clear from their press release that Senators Conrad and Gregg have painted a big red target on Social Security and Medicare,” Mr. Baucus warned. “That’s what this commission is all about. It’s a big roll of the dice for Social Security and Medicare.”

Senator Max Baucus 12/10/09

Conclusions



Mischaracterization of SS makes it more difficult to address

Likely to fail

- By-passes normal legislative process
- Organized citizen opposition

Cannot afford to fail

- Bond markets
- Cynicism

Could derail health reform

Debt limit threat – Dangerous precedent

From Robert M. Ball's forthcoming memoir,
In A Great Cause: My Life with Social Security
Thomas N. Bethell (editor)



“I worry greatly when I hear the Greenspan Commission being touted as a model for negotiations over the future of Social Security,” Ball wrote. “I am afraid that it would become, instead, a mechanism to generate support for compromises that Democrats should feel no need or inclination to accept.”

Robert Ball

From Robert M. Ball's forthcoming memoir,
In A Great Cause: My Life with Social Security
Thomas N. Bethell (editor)



“Democrats in Congress who believe in strengthening rather than undermining Social Security should be willing to stand up for what they believe ... A commission is no substitute for principled commitment. Above all, we should not allow ourselves to fall into the trap of expecting miracles from another Greenspan Commission – by deluding ourselves into believing, mistakenly, that the first one was a great success.”