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## It's Not About the Trustees

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It's bad enough that the government's 2006 annual reports on Social Security and Medicare are late. It's worse that the White House explanation for the delay is so lame.

The reports, due by law on April 1, are compiled each year by the programs' trustees and by experts within Social Security and Medicare. Since 1982, when President Ronald Reagan imposed a strict standard for meeting deadlines, the reports have appeared in March or April all but four times.

This week, Robert Pear reported in *The Times* that the administration had delayed sending the 2006 reports to Congress, pending action by the Senate on President Bush's nominees for two of the programs' six trustees. The vacant positions are for the public trustees.

The last two people to hold the posts were appointed in 2000 and finished their terms last spring. President Bush renominated both of them last November, but senators in both parties have balked at reconfirming the former trustees.




The lawmakers prefer to keep to the tradition of appointing new public trustees each term because, they say, it's important to bring fresh eyes to the process. The impasse over the renominations means that for the past year, the programs have operated with only the government trustees, a group that includes the commissioner of Social Security and the secretaries of the Treasury, Labor, and Health and Human Services Departments.

That's not ideal, but it's not unprecedented. And it's certainly no reason to hold up the show. Even if reconfirmed, the two former public trustees should not sign the 2006 annual reports because they have not been trustees for the past year. The same would apply to any new candidates who might be nominated and confirmed. The 2006 reports should be signed by only the trustees who have served in the past year.

It's unlikely that the report on Social Security is much changed from last year. It's very likely that the Medicare report will show deterioration in the program's financial condition, and it would be shocking if it did not detail the crippling costs and disastrous rollout of the prescription drug benefit. That's clearly not information the administration wants everyone to review in painful detail. But it's information Congress and the public deserve to have. Holding up the reports seems like an attempt to hide the truth.

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