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## **Social Security Deception Funded With Taxpayers' Dollars**

By Mark Weisbrot

Using taxpayers' dollars and government employees to deceive the public is generally prohibited, but lately it seems this has become standard operating procedure. The latest outrage is the Bush Administration's conscription of federal employees at the Social Security Administration in its effort to convince the public that Social Security is in "crisis."

This comes on the heels of a scandal involving the Department of Education payment of \$240,000 of taxpayers' money to commentator Armstrong Williams to promote the Administration's "No Child Left Behind" education agenda.

Last September the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that Tom Scully, former head of Medicare in the Bush Administration, broke the law when he threatened to fire Medicare's chief actuary, Richard Foster. Mr. Foster had wanted to disclose the agency's new estimate of the Medicare prescription drug bill, but backed off when Scully threatened to fire him. At the time, the Bush administration was telling Congress it would cost no more than \$400 billion, but Medicare's actuaries had put the cost at \$500-\$600 billion, which was later accepted as more accurate.

The Bush Administration also used taxpayers' money to sell its Medicare prescription drug bill. It all adds up to a disturbing pattern of deception and abuse of federal offices and funds

to advance a partisan political agenda.

According a New York Times report last Sunday based on internal Social Security Administration (SSA) documents, employees are to promote the following message: " 'Social Security's long-term financing problems are serious and need to be addressed soon,' or else the program may not 'be there for future generations.' "

This is completely false. According to the Social Security Trustees' own numbers -- which President Bush is also using -- the program can pay all promised benefits for the next 38 years, without any changes at all. And even after that it would still pay a larger real (inflation-adjusted) benefit than people receive today -- indefinitely.

The Bush team's public relations efforts took a comical turn last Sunday when Senate majority leader Bill Frist, appearing on ABC's "This Week" told host George Stephanopoulos that Social Security faced a \$10 trillion shortfall.

"But that's over infinity," replied Stephanopoulos, correctly. "OK, \$4 trillion," said Senator Frist.

Ten trillion, four trillion, what's the difference? As the editorial board of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune recently remarked, we seem to be living in a "post-factual world." The \$4 trillion figure (actually \$3.7 trillion) that Senator Frist cited refers to the Trustees' estimate of Social Security's shortfall over the next 75 years.

What Senator Frist didn't mention is that the same table in the Trustees' report shows our GDP (or national income) to be \$567 trillion over the same period. In other words, the looming "crisis" amounts to less than 7 tenths of one percent of our income over the next 75 years -- or about one-third of the cost of President Bush's tax cuts.

It's all smoke and mirrors, just like the weapons of mass destruction and fictional nuclear weapons program that made Iraq a "crisis" requiring an armed invasion.

The latest abuse of our tax dollars is a briefing paper from the Social Security Administration claiming that if nothing is done to "fix" Social Security by 2042, benefit cuts will double the rate of poverty among the elderly. It is based on a number of implausible assumptions, but even if we accept all of them, we are looking at another trick.

The total amount of money that would be necessary to prevent this increase in elderly poverty

three and a half decades from now would very small: 0.0035 percent of our income. For comparison, that's about 16 hours worth of President Bush's tax cuts.

In the next few months we will be subjected to a lot of trickery, exaggerations, and outright lies as President Bush tries to convince the public that Social Security is "on the road to bankruptcy," as he said on Saturday. But the numbers he is using show Social Security to be more financially sound today than it has been throughout most of its history.

If he can pull this one off, we really are living in a "post-factual world." Or at least most of our major news sources are living there.

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