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First Social Security, then taxes

For a president who was boasting not so long ago about all of the "political capital" he had piled up, George W. Bush isn't having much luck getting his domestic agenda through a Congress controlled by members of his own party. Bush's Social Security plan is on the ropes, and now it appears that one of his other big second-term initiatives -- a drive to make his tax cuts permanent -- may not even make it to the ring.

As the [Washington Post](#) reports today, even some Republicans now believe that the government can't afford to extend Bush's tax cuts just now. "The large deficits and apparent inability of Republicans to constrain spending has made it impossible for sensible folks to advocate" big tax cuts, the American Enterprise Institute's Kevin A. Hassett tells the Post. "Sooner or later, government has to pay for everything."

The administration might have hoped that its tax cuts would starve the government of money and thereby force an end to "big government" entitlement programs. To get away with that tactic, however, tax-cut proponents need to get their carving done before the starving starts; if voters understand that taxes are being cut even as critical programs are being dismantled, they're going to be a lot less accepting of the notion that the government just doesn't have enough money to fund the things they want or need it to do.

By that measure, things are moving too quickly for Bush and his tax-cut allies. In order to curb soaring budget deficits, Bush has already proposed massive cuts in this year's budget as well as "user fees" -- in another day, Bush would have called them "taxes" -- on everything from explosives to airline tickets. As the Post notes, more fiscal woes are on the horizon: According to the Government Accountability Office, Medicare funding will come up short by about \$28 trillion over the next 75 years. The GAO says Social Security will need \$3.7 trillion more than it will have -- and that's not counting the "trillions" that the administration says Bush's Social Security plan will cost.

In such a climate, extending tax cuts might just seem a little reckless -- a point Republicans on Capitol Hill are beginning to understand. The chairmen of the Senate Finance and Budget

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"The fact that the Americans don't want negotiations to free the hostages is known. The fact that they do everything to prevent the adoption of this practice to save the lives of people held hostage, everybody knows that. So I don't see why I should rule out that I could have been the target."

-- Italian journalist and former hostage Giuliana Sgrena.

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Committees tell the Post that they may wait until next year -- or later -- before even trying to push an extension of the tax cuts through Congress.

-- Tim Grieve

[08:08 EST, March 7, 2005]

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