

This report investigates whether the Social Security Administration has altered its communications to the public to build support for President Bush's Social Security proposals. In a recent letter to members of Congress, the agency's Commissioner, Jo Anne Barnhart, asserts that there have been no changes in the content of the public communications of the Social Security Administration. According to Ms. Barnhart, who was appointed by President Bush in November 2001, "the messages we use to inform the public have been consistent throughout the past decade." To assess whether Ms. Barnhart's assertions are accurate, the Special Investigations Division reviewed over 4,000 pages of documents relating to the communications strategy of the Social Security Administration. These documents, which were provided in response to a congressional request, include internal agency documents as well as agency press releases, publications, PowerPoint presentations, web postings, and annual statements.

The documents reveal that the Social Security Administration has markedly changed its communications to the public over the last four years. Taken together, these changes — some subtle and others obvious — call into question the agency's independence. While estimates of Social Security's long-term solvency have improved over the last four years, the Social Security Administration's rhetoric has moved in the opposite direction. Public assurances that the Social Security system faces "no immediate crisis" have been eliminated from agency presentations, and descriptions of the role Social Security plays in keeping seniors "out of poverty" have been dropped. In their place, the agency now repeatedly warns that Social Security is "unsustainable" and "underfinanced" and "must change."

The new communication messages are not accidental. During the Clinton Administration, one of the agency's primary strategic goals was to educate the public about the Social Security program. This strategic goal was replaced in 2003 by a new objective to use public communication to "support reforms" to Social Security. The agency's 2005 strategic communications plan states that a key "message" is "Social Security's long-term financing problems are serious and need to be addressed soon."

The changes in the content of agency communications to the public are evident in multiple Social Security documents. Examples include:

Changes in "The Future of Social Security" booklet. The 2000 version of this public primer on Social Security began: "Will Social Security be there for you? Absolutely." In the 2004

version, these reassuring lines are eliminated. Instead, the publication begins: "Social Security must change to meet future challenges." A key heading from the 2000 document read: "Social Security Is an Economic Compact Among Generations." In the 2004 version, the new heading reads: "Current Social Security System Is Unsustainable in the Long Run."

Changes in agency press releases. On an annual basis, the Social Security Trustees release a report on the solvency of the system. Yet as the Trustees' projections of the solvency of Social Security have improved over the last four years, the agency's press releases have grown more dire. The 2001 press release was titled: "Social Security Trust Funds Gain One Additional Year of Solvency." By 2003, the estimate of the program's solvency had increased by four years to 2042. Yet the 2003 press release is titled: "Social Security Not Sustainable for the Long Term" and begins: "The Social Security Board of Trustees today declared that the Social Security program is not sustainable over the long term."

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Changes in other agency communications. The Social Security Administration provides its employees a narrated PowerPoint presentation for use before public audiences. The 2000 narrative told audiences, "There is no immediate financial crisis," and "the baby boom generation's pressure on the trust funds is not permanent." The 2004 narrative removes these statements. New additions to the agency's website warn the public of "a massive and growing shortfall" and benefits that "could be reduced by 33 percent."

The Social Security Administration has even changed the text of the statements sent annually to every worker who contributes to Social Security. The 2001 statements told workers to think of Social Security as a "foundation on which to build your financial future" and assured employees that Social Security will "be there when you retire." These statements are gone from the 2005 version, replaced by the vague but alarming assertion that "Congress has made changes to the law in the past, and can do so at any time."

Taken together, the communication changes reflect a growing politicization of the Social Security Administration. The predictions of Social Security's long-term solvency have improved over the last four years, yet a member of the public reading the agency's public communications during the Bush Administration would be left with exactly the opposite impression. Previous statements by the agency that reassured the public have systematically been replaced by language that calls Social Security "unsustainable" and builds support for the President's case for "reform."

### **Documents and Links**

- [The Report: "Politicization of the Social Security Administration"](#)
- [Press Release](#)