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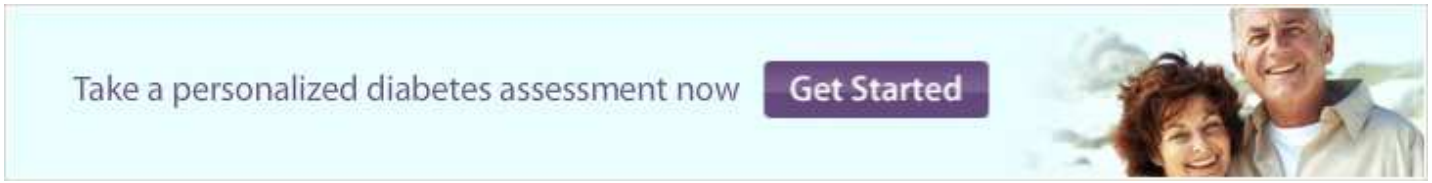

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2010

Conservative Gerson's Social Security Pitch To Obama 'Loaded With Inaccuracies,' Democrat Says

Conservative *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson's piece published Tuesday, in which the former Bush White House speechwriter advises President Obama to take on Social Security reform is laden with factual errors, according to a Democratic strategist who once served as the top staffer on the House Aging Committee.

In his piece, "Face Social Security," Gerson recommends taking on reform of Social Security as a political tool to outmaneuver ascendant Republicans.

However, Robert Weiner, former House Aging Committee chief of staff and later a Clinton White House staffer, takes issue with a number of Gerson's assertions which Weiner labels as erroneous.

"Michael Gerson's column was loaded with inaccuracies," Weiner says in a statement. "The Social Security Trust Fund is NOT 'filled with debt issued by the government itself.' It is 100% filled with the 'match' payroll tax payments by employers and employees as a fully funded insurance program—as designed by Franklin Roosevelt 76 years ago, and strengthened by [then-House Select Committee on Aging Chairman] Claude Pepper [D-Fla.], [then-House Speaker] Tip O'Neill, and [President] Ronald Reagan in 1983.

"What has happened is that the government has borrowed from the solvent Social Security fund for many other purposes from Iraq and Afghanistan to tax breaks," Weiner adds. "When a bank uses a customer's money for other reasons, does that usage count

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against the customer who deposited the money? Of course not. The bank still owes the customer the money. In this case, the Bank is the U.S. Government."

This year, for the first time, by the tax compromise between Obama and congressional Republicans that was just enacted this month, will the government, for one year, reduce the payroll tax which funds Social Security and supply the difference to the trust fund, Weiner notes.

A number of left-leaning opponents of the tax compromise, notably Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), have criticized the payroll tax cut for the potential damage it could do to the future of Social Security.
"Breaking the 'wall' down is a dangerous trend that should be stopped next year as scheduled, regardless of the difficulty of ending a tax 'cut,'" Weiner says.

Weiner complains that there was no biographical note identifying Gerson as George W. Bush's chief speechwriter from 2001-2006 while Bush pushed unsuccessfully to privatize Social Security, a move which helped cost Republicans the Congress.

"In 2005, [former Republican] Speaker Newt Gingrich said he'd 'never seen an issue handled worse by the White House' and Republicans 'could lose the Congress' over it," Weiner says. "Given that he was right, I'm not quite sure President Obama should take Gerson's advice as an action plan.

Gerson says cutting Social Security's looming (in 2037) shortfall is "a relatively small contributor to future deficits" but would be a "large symbol" and "logical place to begin."

"What he means is it would be a symbol of success for launching what the Post's David Broder explained years ago: conservative Republicans actually want to dismantle the entire social safety net begun by Roosevelt's New Deal," Weiner says.

Weiner says that outgoing House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) was right when he said on December 13, "Social Security ought not to be looked at as a way to reduce the deficit."

"Then-and-again House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi proudly said in 2005, 'We stopped them and won' when Democrats blocked the Republicans' Social Security privatization and cuts," Weiner says. "She'll have to lead an even stronger effort this round, because some Democrats have defected."

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