

# Beware of Commissions Bearing Gifts

*Bob Ball anticipated the ‘deficit commission’ –  
and warned against it.*

By Thomas N. Bethell

**M**EMBERS OF CONGRESS, LIKE SPOILED TEENAGERS, are notoriously hard to control. Just when you think they might be inclined to do their homework, they borrow the car without asking, speed to the mall while texting their friends to join them, then spend money they didn't earn. It's enough to make their parents wish for some magical disciplinary power – something imported from another world, perhaps.

That seems to be the thinking behind an idea that's currently gaining momentum in Washington: a bipartisan “deficit commission” empowered to make the tough budgeting and deficit-reducing decisions that Congress is either unwilling or unable to make – specifically with regard to the future of Medicare and Social Security.

Senators Kent Conrad (D., N.D.) and Judd Gregg (R., N.H.) have cast themselves in the frustrated-parents role. They are advancing the argument – promoted for years by Peter G. Peterson, a Nixon-era cabinet member who went on to head a billion-dollar foundation created solely to amplify his views – that “entitlements” are certain to bankrupt the nation; that the only solution is to slash Medicare spending and cut Social Security benefits; and that Congress, left to its own devices, will never muster the nerve to do the job.

That being the case (so Conrad and Gregg claim), the nation will survive only by letting an appointed commission take charge of its future – or at least the future of everyone with a stake in Medicare and Social Security, which means pretty much all of us – with Congress then limited to casting up-or-down votes on the commission's recommendations.

## *Two inconvenient truths*

An inconvenient truth is that under our system of government, Congress is elected and accountable to the electorate; commissions are not. It is not coincidental that there is no mention of commissions in the Constitution. Proponents sometimes try to sidestep this awkwardness by pointing to precedent – arguing that commissions have successfully helped Congress discharge its heavy burdens in the past.

The commission most often cited as a signal success was the National Commission on Social Security Reform, chaired by Alan Greenspan and thus known as the Greenspan Commission. It's often claimed that the Greenspan Commission, created in 1981 to deal with an impending short-term financial crisis in the Social Security system, bravely rose to the occasion and came up with a package of tax increases and benefit cuts that saved Social Security – and, by inference, Congress.

But another inconvenient truth is that the commission did nothing of the kind. Only the rosy glow of revisionist history has made it appear successful.

The reality is that the commission deadlocked early on and stayed paralyzed for a full year. Greenspan convened meeting after meeting in which little of substance happened, and the commission was widely viewed by the media as nothing more than a device to get President Reagan and his Republican allies on Capitol Hill safely past the 1982 mid-term elections without being pilloried as foes of the elderly.

The key member of the commission proved to be Robert M. Ball, a former Social Security commissioner equipped with two formidable weapons: an unsurpassed knowledge of the program and an apparently inexhaustible supply of patience. Less than two weeks before the commission was scheduled to shut down, Ball joined forces with two other key members, Senators Bob Dole and Daniel Patrick Moynihan – Republican and Democrat – and initiated a series of secret meetings with Reagan’s chief of staff, James Baker, a political pragmatist who desperately wanted to get Social Security off-stage long before Reagan ran for a second term in 1984.

It was this rump group – not the Greenspan Commission itself – that found a way to cobble together a compromise package of funding changes to keep Social Security solvent. Ball, an adamant opponent of benefit cuts, was proud that the package – accepted at the last minute by President Reagan and House Speaker Tip O’Neill and only then by the Greenspan Commission – contained no benefit cuts, other than delaying the scheduled cost-of-living adjustment. (Later, when it came time for Congress to enact the package, a benefit cut was added: a gradual increase in the normal retirement age from 65 to 67. Ball opposed it.)

### *No substitute for principled commitment’*

Bob Ball spent the next 25 years of his life on the ramparts, defending Social Security against its many ideological critics and offering sensible proposals to strengthen the system for the long run. Until a few weeks before his death in 2008 – at the age of 93 – he was working on a memoir of his seven decades of public service. Among other things, he was determined to set the record straight about the Greenspan Commission – and to warn against future attempts to use a similar commission as a Trojan-horse device with which to attack Social Security.

“I worry greatly when I hear the Greenspan Commission being touted as a model for negotiations over the future of Social Security,” Ball wrote. “I am afraid that it would become, instead, a mechanism to generate support for compromises that Democrats should feel no need or inclination to accept.”

He added: “[T]o suggest that the Greenspan Commission provides a model for resolving questions about Social Security’s future would be laughable if it were not so dangerous. Democrats in Congress who believe in strengthening rather than undermining Social Security should be willing to stand up for what they believe – preferably with a strong supporter of Social Security in the White House, but standing up in any case. A commission is no substitute for principled commitment. Above all, we should not allow ourselves to fall into the trap of expecting miracles from another Greenspan Commission – by deluding ourselves into believing, mistakenly, that the first one was a great success.”

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Independent Washington writer-editor Thomas N. Bethell is editing Robert M. Ball’s forthcoming memoir, *In A Great Cause: My Life with Social Security*.