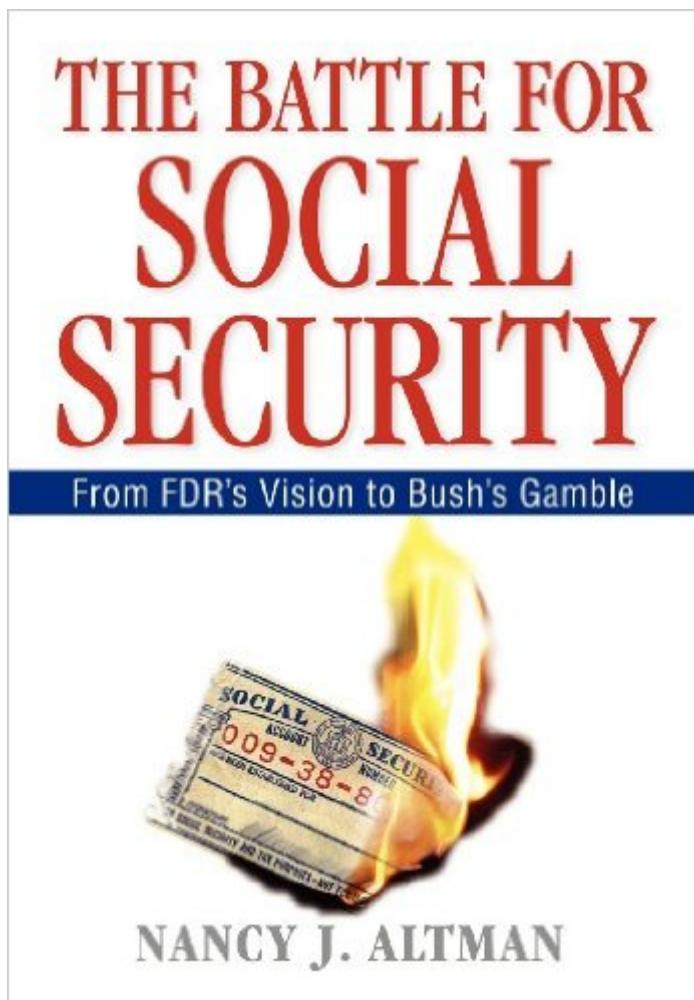


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The Battle For Social Security: From FDR's Vision To Bush's Gamble



Synopsis

This book illuminates the politics and policy of the current struggle over Social Security in light of the program's compelling history and ingenious structure. After a brief introduction describing the dramatic response of the Social Security Administration to the 9/11 terrorist attack, the book recounts Social Security's lively history. Although President Bush has tried to convince Americans that Social Security is designed for the last century and unworkable for an aging population, readers will see that the President's assault is just another battle in a longstanding ideological war. Prescott Bush, the current President's grandfather, remarked of FDR, "The only man I truly hated lies buried in Hyde Park." The book traces the continuous thread leading from Prescott Bush and his contemporaries to George W. Bush and others who want to undo Social Security. The book concludes with policy recommendations which eliminate Social Security's deficit in a manner consistent with the program's philosophy and structure.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was the Commissioner of Social Security under three Presidents (Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon), I began working on Social Security on January 1, 1939, and I have read just about every book written on the subject. The Battle for Social Security is the best Social Security book to come out in a long time, and indeed is among the best ever written on the subject. It is a lively and highly readable journey through the establishment of Social Security, its expansion, and the present attack on the program's principles. Written in an accessible style, it will inform all readers, nonexpert and expert

alike, about the dramatic history of Social Security and why the program should remain as it is currently structured. I urge everyone with a stake in the present battle over Social Security - that means everyone - to read this book.

The Battle for Social Security reads like a fast-paced novel, but with the unique advantage that you can read it in any order. Skipping way ahead to the final chapter From FDR's Vision to Bush's Gamble (chapter 17) you find a six-page summary of the entire book, while The Ideal, Pain-Free (for Almost Everyone) Way to Strengthen Social Security (chapter 16) outlines the author's favorite plan to keep Social Security solvent for the long term. Each chapter tells its own engaging story. The All American Program (chapter 10) recounts the Eisenhower years and the Hobby Lobby; Social Security's Grandfather (chapter 2) explains how John R. Commons' groundwork influenced the people who would advise FDR; Bold Woman, Cautious Men (chapter 4) brings to life the audacious role attorney Barbara Armstrong filled amid the economists and actuaries who crafted FDR's blueprint for Social Security; and Aging Gracefully (chapter 13) describes how the deal was struck by Republicans and Democrats on the commission led by Alan Greenspan (who hired the author as his executive assistant). On signing the compromise legislation in 1983, President Reagan said it "demonstrates for all time our nation's ironclad commitment to social security." A Leninist Strategy (chapter 14), cites plans of some libertarian think tank scholars in the early 1980s to wage "guerrilla warfare against the Social Security system and the coalition that supports it" by a strategy to promote private accounts for young workers and "detach or at least neutralize" older Americans. The Drumbeat Finds a Drummer (chapter 15) recounts how turning part of Social Security into private accounts became the top priority of President Bush's second term in 2005. With careful research, artful story telling, compassion, and wit, The Battle for Social Security clarifies the choices Americans voters and policymakers face as they decide where they want to stand on the future of Social Security.

This book is different from anything I have ever read on this subject (and I have read widely in the field). The Battle for Social Security is deeply researched, entertainingly written, and full of insight about the history and political values of the program. The author, who is very highly qualified, obviously believes in those values, but this book does not involve mindless cheering for Social Security, or knee-jerk Bush bashing. Instead, this work thoughtfully and powerfully details the program's creation and expansion, and explains all the very good (and quite traditional) reasons why it remains popular with most Americans. Chapter 16 has some excellent ideas about how to

keep Social Security solvent for many years without going down the destructive road of private accounts. If you want a pleasant path to a profound understanding of Social Security, this book is for you.

In *The Battle For Social Security*, Nancy Altman provides readers with a detailed and interesting history of the Social Security System from the beginning in the mid-1930s to the present. She brings to life the different participants, and explores the legally and philosophically controversial nature of the Social Security pension and Medicare programs. She also describes the recent efforts to change the system through privatization and recommends modest changes in the current system that will make it actuarilly sound for generations to come. A must read for anyone interested in the future of Social Security.

While Bush's Social Security "reform" now appears to be DOA, this is still a most important book. It is a comprehensive, well-reasoned and non-ideological analysis of a proposal that is itself non-comprehensive, poorly-reasoned and ideological. Through this approach, the book cogently exposes the Emperor as having no clothes (or at least very different ones from the "reform" ones that the Bush Administration has claimed to be wearing) and, even beyond Social Security, offers troubling insights into the manner in which this Administration operates on many fronts. But, again, it is not in any way a political screed, but a thoughtful and careful academic analysis, which makes it that much more credible and important. In addition, it does not only criticize the Bush plan (easy enough to do), but offers its own, well-reasoned approach to avoiding a Social Security deficit in coming years. And, despite both the gravity of the topic and the inherent complexity of the issues surrounding it (legal, economic and political), it is an immensely readable book. I believe this will be THE definitive book on the Bush Administration's Social Security plan -- and why it deserved to fail.

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