

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY

October 15

August 27, 2010

Mr. Simpson Has a Cow

By **GAIL COLLINS**

What are we to make of Alan Simpson, the co-chairman of President Obama's deficit reduction commission, who recently referred to Social Security as "a milk cow with 310 million tits"?

Personally, I would love for us to have a national cow with that sort of milk-giving capacity. But Simpson, who gets very impatient with people who want to preserve current Social Security benefits, did not mean it as a compliment. Now, his remark is getting a lot of attention, and that is only partly because the rest of the news has been so depressing that Bristol Palin's rumored agreement to compete on "Dancing With the Stars" was a high point of the week.

Simpson, 78, is a former Republican senator known for his outspokenness — he once called the American Association of Retired Persons "the greedy geezers of America." In appointing him co-chairman of the president's National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, the White House broke an important political rule, which is to keep away from anyone who considers himself a colorful old codger.

Colorful codgers can be a welcome diversion in mediocre situation comedies, but you do not want one to be the public face of your deficit reduction commission. He might do something crazy, like e-mailing an activist for older American women, to accuse her of "babbling into the vapors," then make disparaging remarks about well-endowed dairy animals and conclude with: "Call when you get honest work!"

Simpson was responding to a Huffington Post article by Ashley Carson, the executive director of the Older Women's League. In it, Carson criticized Simpson's support for reducing Social Security benefits. She also slammed his "record of sexism" and "his constant bashing of seniors."

Carson's post had been published in April. So besides writing an e-mail that confirmed all of her worst charges, Simpson was also choosing to get involved in a fight whose expiration date had long since kicked in. Perhaps he was in a bad mood because his son had just lost a

gubernatorial primary to the grandson of another former United States senator. To make matters worse, the younger Simpson came in fourth, behind people who were not even direct descendants of major state politicians.

After his e-mail rant was made public, Simpson apologized in his colorful old codger way. ("Over the last 40 years I have had my size 15 feet in my mouth a time or two.") But that did not stop the demands that he resign or be fired.

So far, Obama is sticking with his deficit-reduction co-chairman. He picked Simpson for the job because he is a Republican willing to talk about Social Security tax increases, a breed rarer than the ivory-billed woodpecker. The administration was obviously hoping that the commission would come up with a bipartisan plan that would combine a rise in payroll taxes with a modest reduction in benefits. The system is supposed to run out of money in 2037, and if we could fix it now, the pain would be much more modest than if Congress waited until, say, January of 2038.

This is so totally contrary to the current culture of Washington that it seems sort of touching that anybody might imagine it can happen. However, there is too much negativity in the world these days. I hereby offer a two-part proposal for fixing Social Security:

MORE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS Immigration in general is a Social Security plus, since new arrivals tend to be young, and likely to contribute to the retirement system through payroll taxes for a long time before they start collecting. But illegal immigrants never get to collect at all. Their money only goes one way, toward benefits for the rest of us. Arizona retirees, tear down your walls.

TAX LONGER LIVES Some experts, including people in the administration, believe that Congress should raise the age at which people can retire on full Social Security benefits, which is currently 66 and will rise to 67 for younger workers. Personally, I will be happy to rally around this idea the very second that the White House announces there is a large pool of job opportunities for unemployed 60-year-olds that are going begging.

The theory behind raising the retirement age is that people are living longer these days. However, the Americans who do all this extra living tend to be wealthier than the ones who expire before they can cash their first pension check. Right now, only the first \$106,800 in annual income is taxed for Social Security. Get rid of the cap, and you will be making the folks who are causing most of the problem pay for the solution.

Finally, we could make a rule that it is unacceptable for people who are collecting large government pensions to make fun of retirees who want to keep Social Security benefits the way they are. Particularly if they try to be colorful about it.