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ARE DEPENDENT WIVES OBSOLETE?

Among the many intricate aspects of the Social Security system which are the subject of current hearings by a subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee is a weird proposal to eliminate the benefits paid to dependent wives and widows. These benefits have been an integral part of the system for more than 40 years.

The Social Security retirement system functions in a typical family like this. When a covered worker retires, he receives a benefit check and his dependent wife receives a second check in the amount of 50 percent of the husband's benefit. This benefit is the way our society honors the homemaking, child-caring contribution of the dependent wife.

Now comes a Subcommittee witness who wants to wipe out the dependent wife's benefit. Last month, Rita Ricardo Campbell of the Hoover Institution testified: "I again recommend ... that over a 30-year period there be a phase-out of the retired spouse's secondary benefit, now one-half of the primary [worker's benefit]."

To substitute for this radical liquidation of the dependent-wife's lifetime coverage, Mrs. Campbell tosses her a crumb from the table: "for each of the first two children born to a woman there be given two or three years of earnings credit toward a Social Security benefit." Mrs. Campbell admits that by the years 2000-2010 women who have relatively large families (more than two children) would be totally without S.S. benefits.

Mrs. Campbell is quite frank in her objective. She rejoices in the "increase in the number of women in the paid labor force" and she wants to induce the rest of women to move into the labor force as rapidly as possible. In a previously published article she wrote: "The current system ... discourages women from working outside of the home ... It may be in the area of inducing a higher labor force participation rate by women ... that long-run solutions may be successfully sought.".

The social, economic, financial, and political implications of Mrs. Campbell's revolutionary proposal are vast. Her argument assumes that society has no interest in

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how much time a mother spends caring for her babies, or if, indeed, she spends any time at all, and that children no longer need mother-care after the age of two or three.

Those pushing the elimination of the wife's benefit in Social Security are trying to make the dependent wife obsolete in our society. But babies in the 1980s are no different from babies in the 1930s; they need mother-care just as much.

When a wife and mother spends her time in the home rearing children who are moral, law-abiding, industrious, educated, emotionally well-adjusted, and capable of forming strong families of their own, she makes the greatest of all career contributions to a healthy society and to the future of our nation.

In addition, dependent wives are the greatest financial asset the Social Security system has. This is because Social Security is a pay-as-we-go system (i.e., today's benefits are paid from today's taxes; tomorrow's benefits will be paid from taxes on tomorrow's crop of young workers),

Economists generally agree that, when women enter the labor force, they have fewer children than they otherwise would have. The American birth rate is already below maintenance level; if it drops much lower, there will be no financial future for the Social Security system because there will not be enough young workers to pay the costs.

Economists also agree that the elimination of the wife's benefit would cause an increase in the number of wives seeking employment. From 1960 to 1977, the number of women in the labor force increased 8.7 million and the number of persons unemployed increased 3 million. The costs of dealing with the unemployment problem have contributed mightily to inflation, which in turn induces more wives to enter the labor force.

It should be remembered that Social Security treats female workers exactly like male workers. Because of Supreme Court decisions and statutory changes, there is no sex discrimination against women in Social Security. Actually, the female worker gets more for her tax dollars than the male worker because she lives longer.

Since the start of the Social Security system, no class of beneficiaries has ever been legislated out of the system. To eliminate the wife's benefits now would cause a massive loss of confidence not only in Social Security but in our Government itself. It would be political suicide for any politician who espoused this weird idea.

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