

Obama defends plan to cut Medicare and Social Security

By Andre Damon
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After media reports that the Obama administration plans to slash Medicare and Social Security in its latest budget proposal due to be released Wednesday, government officials have been seeking to diffuse popular opposition to the cuts.

In his weekly radio address Saturday, Obama sought to portray the budget proposal, which slashes \$1.2 trillion in spending over the course of ten years, as an unavoidable compromise in the face of intransigent demands by the Republicans. “While it’s not my ideal plan to further reduce the deficit, it’s a compromise I’m willing to accept in order to move beyond a cycle of short-term, crisis-driven decision-making... It includes ideas many Republicans have said they could accept as well.”

The Obama administration’s budget proposal, due to be released on Wednesday, will incorporate all of the spending cuts included in previous “Grand Bargain” proposals, including sharp cuts in Medicare, Social Security, federal worker pensions and other vital programs.

White House officials indicated in a press conference last week that the budget proposal will include \$1.2 trillion in spending cuts over ten years, including \$400 billion in cuts to Medicare and other health care programs and \$130 billion from reducing inflation calculations linked to Social Security payments.

In the course of discussions over the “fiscal cliff” earlier this year, the administration publicly released a proposal that includes many other cuts—such as \$35 billion in the “reform” of federal retirement programs, the ending of Saturday delivery for the US postal service, and increased fees for airline travel.

The White House budget will be the basis for further negotiations with Republicans, which will inevitably mean even more cuts.

The Medicare cuts will reportedly include means testing for recipients—a move that would transform it from a universal entitlement to an antipoverty program, in preparation for its gutting and ultimate destruction—and a cigarette tax, a regressive consumption tax. The means testing proposal in particular marks a sharp escalation in the attack on Medicare.

“The budget reflects his priorities within a budget world that is not ideal,” White House press secretary Jay Carney said Friday, when the bill was announced. “It requires compromise, negotiation and a willingness to accept that you won’t get 100 percent of what you want.”

But even while seeking to blame the Republicans for the most draconian elements of his proposal, Obama was unapologetic in his calls for slashing entitlements, a proposal opposed by the overwhelming majority of the population. Obama defended the cuts as a way to strengthen a “rising, thriving middle class,” adding that he is in favor of “tough reforms required to strengthen Medicare for the future.”

Talk of “strengthening” Medicare is the standard Orwellian argument employed by both political parties to justify unpopular cuts.

According to the White House, the budget proposal will contain significantly more cuts than the Democratic-controlled Senate’s budget proposal. The Senate budget, which balances out spending cuts and revenue increases equally, was intended largely as political posturing.

As the *Washington Post* commented, “The budget request reflects Obama’s stark shift in strategy over the past month, as he has adopted a far more congenial posture toward the opposition.” Obama plans to sit down for dinner with Republicans Wednesday, within

hours of the announcement of his budget.

Far from drawing the line at the cuts Obama has already proposed, Democratic Party leaders have indicated that the latest budget would be the stepping-stone toward further concessions to Republican demands. Chris Van Hollen, the ranking Democrat on the House Budget Committee said, "From the Republican perspective, the president's budget is the starting point for negotiation."

Republicans responded positively to Obama's proposal. "The president is showing a little bit of leg here, this is somewhat encouraging," said South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham Sunday on NBC's Meet the Press. He added that Obama has "made a step forward in the entitlement-reform process that would allow a guy like me to begin to talk about flattening the tax code and generating more revenue."

Publicly, Obama claims to be exchanging cuts to social programs for getting Republicans to agree to new sources of revenues, which the White House claims will come mostly from the wealthy. In reality, the White House proposal includes a variety of regressive taxes and funding measures, including a tax on cigarettes and a measure to block individuals from receiving unemployment insurance and disability payments at the same time.

As the White House has ever more openly come out in favor of cuts to the bedrock social programs, his professional "left" apologists have been mobilized in an attempt to channel popular opposition back behind Obama and the Democratic Party. On Monday the AFL-CIO published a statement urging those who oppose slashing Social Security to sign a petition urging Obama to reconsider its support for the cuts.

Calling the cuts "unconscionable," the AFL-CIO's statement concluded, "These cuts are bad policy. And the only way we're going to stop them is if President Obama and all members of Congress hear that we're not going to tolerate them."

The Nation, the mouthpiece of what remains of American liberalism, was reserved in its opposition to the cuts, calling them "wrong economically, and politically."

All of these forces had endorsed Obama for a second term, even after four years of war and austerity. Their central political function is to do whatever they can to prevent a break from the Democratic Party.

With the formal publication of Obama's budget this week, Obama's left apologists will be called on to diffuse the vast political opposition to cuts in Social Security and Medicare. But despite their best efforts, the administration's assault on the most basic social rights of the US population must inevitably lead to mass opposition and social upheavals.

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