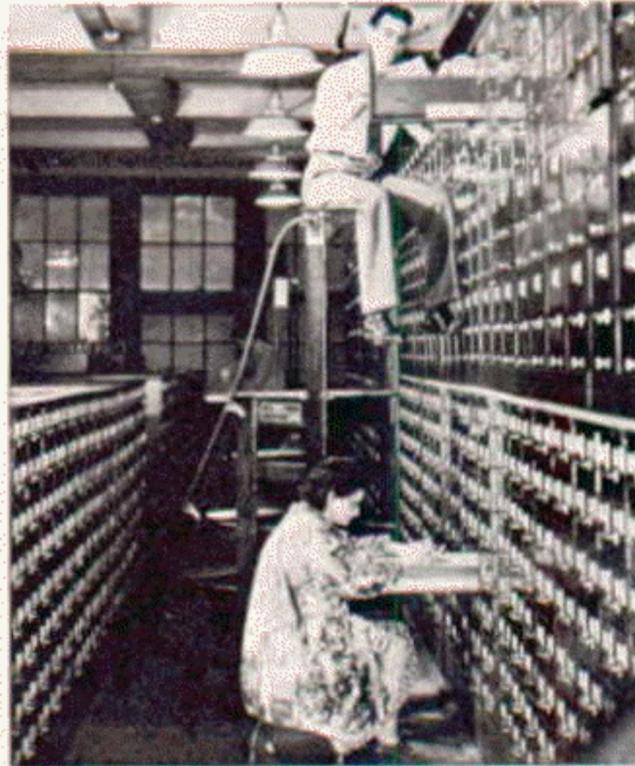


Oasis

AUGUST 1971



Social Security Marks Its 36th Birthday



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Security For A People

On December 15, 1936, the First Annual Report of the Social Security Board was issued. The Foreword to the Report seems to be almost timeless in its message. Certainly, as we contemplate the proposed amendments embodied in H.R. I, this statement of the Board members was prophetic: "Above all, security is not static. The march of the decades brings changed conditions. Old problems have to be freshly stated, established safeguards to be replanted by new."

In this anniversary month (the Social Security Act was signed August 14, 1935) OASIS reprints the Foreword in its entirety.

AN ATTEMPT TO FIND security for a people is among the oldest of political obligations and the greatest of the tasks of a State. The Declaration of Independence sets down as self-evident the right of a people "to provide new guards for a future security." The avowed object of the Constitution of the United States is "to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

But what is security? It is no blessing to be had for the asking. It is no gift of the government through a single legislative act. It is no abstraction too nebulous for definition. Security begins with bread and butter. But a mere subsistence is no security for the American citizen. The Nation is rich in natural resources; it possesses a developing technology; it has a varied abundance of human capacities to turn to account. Security is more than a condition of material well-being. An opportunity to earn a living, to be a member of the community, to have a part in the government is basic. In positive terms, the security of a people is the sum of the arrangements set up by business, by the government, and by society through which the things we cherish are safeguarded against the hazards we, as individuals, cannot control.

Above all, security is not static. The march of the decades brings changed conditions. Old problems have to be freshly stated, established safeguards to be supplanted by new. But there is still the necessity of serving a people in their lives and properties, their liberties and opportunities. As we have met the exigencies which changing times have brought, the domain of security has been enriched and enlarged. As the way opens ahead, we must secure its wider opportunities.

The quest of security is a task for the whole of the people. It must be worked out within a system which is distinctly American. That system does not offer the individual a life of security. It grants him an opportunity and imposes upon him the obligation to find security for himself. There can be no obligation without opportunity. And for opportunity the individual must look to private enterprise. Upon it he is dependent for a job, an income, a chance to get ahead, a place to put his savings. If agriculture, industry, and business are articulated into an orderly and smoothly running system, the more fundamental part of the problem is solved. To the extent to which they are not so articulated, an obligation rests upon the government. Agriculture and industry must be aided to provide the opportunities out of which the security of the people is to be created. Thus, the security of a people is a great cooperative enterprise. The citizens, the economic system, and the government are partners in this national provision.

In this endeavor the government has its distinctive



Members of the first Social Security Board were Arthur J. Altmeyer, Chairman John G. Winant, and Vincent M. Miles.

part. Its task is to quicken opportunity, to set up barriers against industrial shock, to care for the needy for whom private enterprise cannot provide. Its policies must be directed to all groups in society. The Nation is an intricate organization of activities. Interests, occupations, and sections have different tasks to perform in a national economy. The security of each must be promoted within the circumstances peculiar to it.

The Social Security Act was passed as a single measure to promote the realization of this broad aim. Its meaning and significance are to be discovered in its relationship to the society it serves. It does not usurp the role of private enterprise. It recognizes work and a wage as the best security which the worker can find for himself. The Act provides not a complete security in itself but a necessary complement to the security afforded by private enterprise and a complement to other measures of government directed to the same end. The plan would make a sorry go of it if the whole burden of keeping a people from destitution fell upon its provisions. In fact, it is the reasonable certainty of what industry can provide that makes it possible for government to undertake its task. It carries no threat to the way of individual thrift. On the contrary, it enlarges the opportunities and lessens the hazards of personal provision.

Here is the key to the Social Security Act. It hedges the major hazards of life about with safeguards which neither the individual alone nor industry unaided can provide. The life of the worker is continuous. The income from his job obeys the tides of the market; his expenses click on endlessly with the clock. This is the case for unemployment compensation. The worker's living comes from his job; yet his life is likely to outlast the skills which he can market. Neither wages nor savings can be depended upon to protect him against want in old age. The way of individual provision is beset with too many perils for safety. This is the case for old-age benefits. A number of hazards which no one can control lie in the path of every man and every woman—a dependent childhood, blindness, disability, the need for maternity care, an indigent old age. This is the case for public assistance and special services for health and welfare.

We cannot achieve security for a Nation without promoting the security of the groups which make it up. But interests are interlocked. The well-being of industry reaches the farmer in a more plentiful supply of cheaper goods, just as an increase in the stream of farm income sets wheels turning and wage earners to work. As in war, so in public policy, forces must be massed at certain points of stress to protect the safety of all.