

The Formative Years of Social Security

The Formative Years of Social Security, by Arthur Altmeyer, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wis., 1966, The SSA Library (Room 571, Administration Wing, SSA, Baltimore, Md. 2 1235) has several copies of this book. They are available for circulation to personnel in the field- as well as at headquarters.

THIS BOOK needed to be written. Fortunately, the one person best equipped to write it is the author, Arthur Altmeyer. He has discharged an obligation and, in the doing of it, has added luster to his already distinguished public service.

If you want to learn how to determine social security eligibility, calculate a benefit, or get an account number, you won't find the answer in this volume. But *The Formative Years of Social Security* has no equal as an authentic, reliable, and readable chronicle of the events, people, and circumstances significant to the enactment and implementation of the Social Security Act.

While the book is somewhat autobiographical, Mr. Altmeyer was so continuously at the focal point of action and so intimately involved and influential in all that took place that his personal experience and the march of historical events tend to merge.

The origin of the term "social security" is an interesting story with several great personalities of the day contributing to its creation and popular acceptance. Mr. Altmeyer (he dislikes being called *Doctor*, which he is) gives most credit for the name to Abe Epstein, the Secretary of the American Association for Social Security (successor to the American Association for Old-Age Security). He recalls drolly that the impetuous Mr. Epstein, struggling to keep his organization financially afloat, struck a blow for the program label and saved a few printing dollars in the bargain by using his old letterheads with the word "social" substituted for "old-age."

From that fateful day in June 1934, when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 6757 that created

the Committee on Economic Security, a technical board, an advisory council, and an executive director- a document drafted by Mr. Altmeyer at the behest of Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins (who had received their instructions from the President) -through the "uncertain years" 1952-54, we now have for all time an inside, firsthand, and authoritative account of social security's conception and early life.

Despite the dramatics of the situation, such as the political jockeying for position and the fervor of the backers of competing proposals, Mr. Altmeyer deals with this period in an objective, almost detached, way even though the book is spiced with numerous personal experiences that are both enlightening and entertaining.

The deliberations of the Committee on Economic Security are dealt with in considerable detail with much information given on the considerations involved in the choice of alternative program proposals. Unemployment Compensation gets the major share of this section. Perhaps this is a reflection of the many controversial issues involved and the Committee's concern that measures for the aged "might obscure the need for this branch of social insurance."

The importance of constitutional questions, both during the developmental and legislative periods, is frequently referred to by Mr. Altmeyer as evidence of the extent to which program and procedure were devised to skirt the shoals of possible legal disaster. The account of action on the "Hill," preceding the enactment of the Social Security Act, is a fascinating case history of the legislative process but must be read to be appreciated.

This reviewer was amused by the author's matter-of-fact account of "Putting the Act into Operation." This was a period of midnight oil, daily crisis, and explosive expansion, the like of which, until then, had never been seen by a peacetime Federal agency. But the incidents chosen for special mention are certainly illustrative of the myriad headaches which were successfully overcome during those unforgettable years.

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About the Reviewer



WILLIAM MITCHELL was Commissioner of Social Security from January 1959 to March 1962 when he retired after 40 years Federal service. He joined the Social Security Board in 1936 as Director of its Bureau of Business Management and served as Deputy Commissioner from 1947 to 1959.

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Only the briefest comment is possible, in the remaining space for this review, on the chapters covering the years that followed. When the fever of initial organization had subsided, there followed a period of refinement and improvement both in program and administration. "The Postwar Years" saw the federalization of the Employment Service—a feat managed so dextrously that the complex legal and administrative hazards were minimized.

Then, in order, follow Mr. Altmeyer's absorbing account of the developments of what he calls the "postwar," "crucial," and "uncertain" years. He documents, with restraint, his disappointment over the almost "catastrophic" damage to the administration of social security brought about by a highly questionable exercise of executive authority by Congress through an appropriation act. Less dramatic but of greater long-range consequence was the ebb and flow of program activity and the day-to-day problems in protecting and guiding it.

This is *must* reading for every public official, for the student of public administration as well as for those interested in social security. Individual illustrative incidents are used to trace the growing pains of this burgeoning public agency.

The book concludes with a backward glance and a look ahead. A very useful appendix and index are included.

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