

## Domestic Credit by Lydia Schulman

### Elderly on the firing line

*With all the charges of "waste" being raised against America's elderly population, one Congressman has stood up to set the record straight.*

As part of the ongoing fiscal 1981 budget debate, some groups have stepped forward to isolate various programs for the elderly—social security, social security cost of living escalator clauses, medicare, etc.—as prime targets for cuts. These groups all clutch reports of studies purporting to show the elderly living in the lap of luxury or close to it. Two recent examples of this type of spurious study are a January cover story appearing in *Forbes* magazine, and a lengthy study conducted by the *New York Times* Feb. 15.

*This week, with the congressman's office's permission, we reprint part of the statement of Rep. Claude Pepper (D-Fla.), chairman of the House Select Committee on the Aging.*

With the race to embrace fiscal responsibility in high gear, academicians, journalists, and politicians are falling over one another in an effort to find "waste" and "fat" in the federal budget. All too often, "waste" constitutes expenditures for persons who are the least able to defend themselves politically. It is small wonder, then, that the new panacea for budget-cutters is the slashing of benefits for America's aged.

The most recent but surely not the last salvo to be fired in this direction appeared in the Feb. 15 *New York Times* (Are Old Folks Really Poor?). In a cynical attempt

to portray the staggering proportions of poverty among the aged as a "stereotyped view of aging," the authors sought to create a fantasyland of typically wealthy, healthy, and well nourished elderly persons that plead poverty in order to live off the fat of the land.

Messrs. Rabushka and Jacobs believe that there is a "commonly held image of misfortune and need" with respect to the elderly. According to the authors, "widespread news-media coverage" of a "select few among the elderly" who might suffer from a host of trumped-up maladies and misfortunes reinforces these "preconceptions"...

Where does this so-called myth originate? To find out, Messrs. Rabushka and Jacobs polled 1,500 elderly homeowners on the effects of poverty on their lives. This is not unlike testing 1,500 graduate school students to determine the extent of illiteracy among young Americans....

Perhaps Rabushka and Jacobs would have encountered more difficulty had they bothered to poll the 14.6 million elderly persons with incomes under \$5,999 or the more than 16 million persons over 65 with incomes under \$6,999. These groups constitute 64 and 70 percent, respectively, of the total elderly population in America. From the standpoint of time alone, the authors did well to confine their survey to 1,500 elderly homeowners.

From a standpoint of accuracy, however, the economic plight of the aged was distorted to the point where any connection with reality was purely accidental. Surely these researchers had access to Census Bureau statistics which reveal that the family income for older persons is 43 percent below the national average and that the median income for elderly persons living alone—\$4,305—is 36 percent lower than the national average. Surely they were aware that persons over 65 constitute almost 23 percent of everyone in America with an income under \$4,999 although they comprise only 10.7 percent of the overall population....

Supplemental Security Income does indeed, as stated in the article, provide a guaranteed minimum income to all older Americans. The maximum benefit of \$208 to a person with no other income was casually omitted from discussion. If those anxious to "cut the fat" ever attempted to live on \$208 per month, the inadequacies of the benefit level would acquire new significance....

In view of the fact that Medicare pays less than 43 percent of an average older person's health bill, it is not very likely that one will find many people who have received a fiscal windfall as a result of in-kind health benefits. Medicare, moreover, is financed by Social Security payroll taxes paid into the system during a person's working years, as well as monthly premiums paid after age 65....

It is nothing short of a tragedy that the greatest country in the world, with all of its vast resources, cannot allow its elderly population to live out the rest of their lives in dignity and decency.