

# *Commissions: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*



## **Demystifying the Deficit, Social Security Finances, and Commissions**

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# This paper



**Draws on the experience of two  
commissions to assess the likelihood of  
success of the Conrad-Gregg Proposal**

- 1982 National Commission on Social Security Reform
- 1994 Bipartisan Commission on Entitlements & Tax Reform

*But first a story about David Stockman*

# Proposed Conrad-Gregg Fast Track Commission

Not clear what is really on the table

But Social Security & Medicare are for sure

18 Commission members

Treasury Secretary and one Presidential Appointment

16 members of Congress, appointed by D & R leaders


Reports after 2010 mid-term elections

If 14 members agree, up or down vote on package  
(without amendments) requiring 3/5 majority in House  
and Senate

By-passes normal congressional processes

Debt-ceiling threat by proponents

# SIMILARITIES IN 1982 & 1994

- 
- Origins centered around presidential and congressional politics
  - Superficially, similar structure and subjects
  - High profile commissions
  - Ably staffed
  - Mid-term elections played important role
  - Both gained consensus on existence of a problem

# DIFFERENCES

Changed political context

No short-term crisis

Presidential support

Orientation of staff

Bounded vs. expansive scope

Traditional vs. neoconservative assumptions  
about Social Security

Political negotiation vs. marketing

Analysis vs. market research

Outcomes

# COMMISSIONS




## What do they do?

- deflect blame
- define or obfuscate problems
- sometimes facilitate governance

## Likelihood of success enhanced by

- substantial presidential & congressional backing
- real crisis
- agreement on key facts
- internal compromise
- absence of legislators who want to block recommendations
- absence of organized groups committed to policy outcomes
- utilizing the normal legislative channels



“It is clear from their press release that Senators Conrad and Gregg have painted a big red target on Social Security and Medicare,” Mr. Baucus warned. “That’s what this commission is all about. It’s a big roll of the dice for Social Security and Medicare.”

Senator Max Baucus 12/10/09

# Conclusions



Mischaracterization of SS makes it more difficult to address

Likely to fail

- By-passes normal legislative process
- Organized citizen opposition

Cannot afford to fail


- Bond markets
- Cynicism

Could derail health reform

Debt limit threat – Dangerous precedent



From Robert M. Ball's forthcoming memoir,  
*In A Great Cause: My Life with Social Security*  
Thomas N. Bethell (editor)



“I worry greatly when I hear the Greenspan Commission being touted as a model for negotiations over the future of Social Security,” Ball wrote. “I am afraid that it would become, instead, a mechanism to generate support for compromises that Democrats should feel no need or inclination to accept.”

Robert Ball

From Robert M. Ball's forthcoming memoir,  
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“Democrats in Congress who believe in strengthening rather than undermining Social Security should be willing to stand up for what they believe ... A commission is no substitute for principled commitment. Above all, we should not allow ourselves to fall into the trap of expecting miracles from another Greenspan Commission – by deluding ourselves into believing, mistakenly, that the first one was a great success.”