

WILL BOOMERS REALLY BANKRUPT SOCIAL SECURITY?

by Charles Jacobs

Beltway cognoscenti rail about the future of Social Security, but the impact on the nation's social and demographic balance may not be as severe as they anticipate.

It's true that 78 million Baby Boomer will reach retirement age, with the first wave now turning 65 and ending their life-long careers. Just this month Kathleen Casey Kirschling, the first Boomer to file for Social Security payments, received her first check.

Without question, the number of Social Security applicants will grow. 76 million Americans are now 50 years or older. Experts predict that number will increase 27% to a record 97.1 million over the next two years. That rate of growth is not surprising with 7,918 Americans turning 60 every day, according to Census Bureau statistics.

Retirement's Changing

What the Washington analysts haven't considered as they issue their dire forecasts is the radical change in the perception of retirement, spurred by the derring-do of this population group. Baby Boomers are a feisty lot, pace setters in the changing concepts of marriage, divorce, parenting, work ethics, patriotism and more. And they're just as plucky in their perception of retirement. The majority will continue to work, albeit not necessarily at their former jobs, and that means they will continue to pay taxes.

That independent spirit is not surprising since the oldest members grew up during the radical changes of post-World War II America. Younger Boomers survived the turbulent sixties and the war in Vietnam, the Woodstock Festival and the "Age of Love." So it isn't surprising that their view of retirement strays far afield from that of their parents.

Boomers are approaching their more advanced years with the same sense of independence and pioneering that guided their earlier life. A number hope to continue working in their chosen fields. Many plan to pursue interests that were never before possible because of past

demands of child rearing and full-time work. Almost all are determined to spend their remaining years in productive meaningful activities, whether compensated or volunteer.

George Deeb, chief executive of the travel company iexplore summed the picture up well when he told an interviewer at *The Wall Street Journal* that “Boomers have been in an aggressive period of accumulating assets –homes, cars, boats, and now they’re going to get into a period of accumulating experiences.”

Faced with better health and far greater life expectancy than their predecessors, Boomers intend to make the most of those gifts. Just 100 years ago an average person’s life ended at 47 years of age. Today’s Seniors will almost double that, and look forward to the freedom to be themselves during those bonus years.

New Opportunities

The new wave of Seniors interprets freedom as the opportunity to choose whether to continue to work, participate actively in volunteer efforts or devote more time to life-long hobbies. Many envision fulfilling a long-held dream in the arts: painting, sculpting and for the majority writing a book.

My discussions with more than 80 retirees as I conducted research into the retirement experience before writing my most recent book reinforced my initial perception that the most will continue to work in some form and earn monies. As a result, they will continue, just as I and so many other Seniors do, to support Social Security.

While most will retire in their sixties, 75% hope to continue working by launching a new career, according to a study by Merrill Lynch. Some will continue in their own field, while others will seek more satisfying challenges or become entrepreneurs starting their own business, the

study found. No matter what road they take, the majority of Boomers view retirement as an opportunity to remain productive, pursuing an activity that has deep meaning to them and continuing to contribute to society.

Whenever I speak before various groups and organizations on subjects related to writing and publishing, I too find that there is a burning desire to be productive on the part of older members of the audience. Of course, in their case, their interest lies specifically in writing after they retire.

The desire they express repeatedly is to realize a life-long dream of writing a book. Findings of the Gallup polling organization reflect that desire. The pollsters report that 81% of mature American adults have a book inside them waiting to be written.

Even the Language Is Changing

Mitch Anthony, a well known author and consultant to financial planners, coined the word “retirementality” for the title of one of his books. And today’s Boomers do have a very different mentality than their predecessors. They echo Anthony’s catch phrase, “It’s never too late to be what you want to be.” Anthony also speaks of “playcheck” for the many retirees who now work at a job they really enjoy.

The proliferation of new terms like these is proof of the changing nature of retirement in America. No longer can we view retirement as lazy days at the card table or on the fairway. Members of today’s vibrant older population much prefer to remain actively involved in pursuits that are meaningful to themselves and to the society in which they live.

A number of web sites have proliferated that speak to the interests of these active Seniors. Marika Stone, co-founder with her husband Howard of the *2Young2retire* program and web site, explains this new phenomenon well in her cogent statement to *US News & World Report*, “At a certain time of life--call it midlife--you look beyond just making a living for yourself and your family to thinking about what your contribution is or could be.”

While they will draw the Social Security checks they are entitled to, a majority of these innovative retirees will continue to work and contribute their fair share of payroll taxes, a factor Washington’s doom and gloomers have never stopped to consider.