

Don't Privatize Social Security

By Mark Gaffney, The Detroit News

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What a rollercoaster week it's been. In the span of a couple days, major investment firms and an insurance firm have collapsed or been bailed out. The stock market dropped 500 points in one day -- the most since 9-11. Yet Sen. John McCain and a handful of other conservatives still insist the fundamentals of the economy are strong.

It seems obvious that the fundamentals of the economy aren't strong. Far from it. In fact, what's happening on Wall Street is the result of getting rid of the rules -- built back after the Great Depression -- that kept firewalls between banks, insurance and investment firms. .Staunch believers in the free, unfettered market, they resisted any government intervention, and so profits flowed more freely than ever to the wealthiest, while the rest of us were left behind.

Working Americans are left to clean up the mess and to bail out the robber barons who created it.

What's done is done, but let's learn our lesson well and take a careful look at what we can do to help rebuild this economy safely and soundly.

Let's start with retirement, something that is on top of many people's minds as they watch the markets stumble. No group is more vulnerable in the failing economy than our nation's seniors, many of whom are on fixed incomes and barely getting by as it is. Social Security is a lifeline for retirees.

Since its inception, Social Security has elevated millions of elderly Americans out of poverty, and provided them with the basic financial guarantees after a lifetime of hard work. Twenty percent of older Americans live solely off their Social Security benefits, and 60 percent of recipients rely on it for more than half of their incomes. It is the cornerstone of this country's social compact.

GOP presidential candidate John McCain advocates privatizing Social Security, which would put stable retirement benefits in the same unstable market that has nosedived. In a world where it's getting harder and harder for most people to make ends meet, and more and more people are living paycheck to paycheck, policies that willfully risk retirement security don't meet the needs of working people.

On the other hand, Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama proposes common-sense steps to shore up, not sell out, Social Security. These include increasing the cap on taxable income so that the richest Americans contribute

their fair share. Sen. Obama has said he will work to keep Social Security funded and available to all seniors, showing us once again that he respects working people and retirees in a way that John McCain does not.

When Obama was in Detroit over Labor Day, he said, "the idea behind the labor movement is that you don't walk alone. Each of us are vulnerable by our self...when we understand that I am my brothers' keeper, that I am my sister's keeper, when we recognize ourselves in each other...then we understand what motivated people...to join together to form a union."

That same sentiment, that we are our brother's keeper, goes for Social Security, too.

The whole idea is that together we are stronger than alone, and that we can pool our resources and strength for a better future for everyone.

America's economy doesn't have to be risky and tumultuous. We have the ingenuity and the skills to build an economy that works for all -- an economy with good jobs, strong and dependable retirements, and a truly secure Social Security.

Anything less just means that we are destined to revisit this crazy week, all over again, but with even less safeguards than we have now.

Courtesy: <http://www.globalaging.org/pension/us/2008/social.htm>