



# Policymaking for Social Security

*Martha Derthick*

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## **Policymaking for Social Security** Martha Derthick

Americans are becoming more aware of their social security program and less contented with it. They see their taxes rising and are not sure that they will get their money's worth in future benefits. In the mid-1970s costs unexpectedly outran revenues, and in 1977 Congress reluctantly took action; but it had no sooner enacted new taxes than members began submitting bills to revise them. A social security taxpayers' revolt seemed to be brewing.

No longer a "sacred cow," as Milton Friedman once remarked of it, the program has come increasingly under fire. Martha Derthick, in this comprehensive analysis of policy-making for social security, concludes that such criticism is healthy and that reexamination of long-established doctrines and policies is very much to be desired. In the past, she writes, "the nature of policymaking did little to correct, but instead reinforced, a complacent, poorly informed acceptance of the program—participation was so narrowly confined; expert proprietary dominance was so complete; debate was so limited; the technicality was so appealing; and the forward steps each seemed so small."

With detailed documentation from primary sources, Derthick shows how policymaking has been dominated until recently by a small group of specialists. But now, with difficult times ahead, the pattern is changing, and more people inside and outside the government seek to influence decisions. Derthick argues that this trend should be encouraged. In her view, social security ought to be treated like any other government program and be subject to the same competitive pressures. Reduction of benefits, hitherto considered a forbidden topic, ought to be open to political debate.

Derthick has divided the book into four parts, dealing first with the small group of men and women who molded the program; next with the basic policies that have governed it; and third with the politics of expansion in three areas—disability coverage, medicare, and cash benefits. In the final part she examines the current deficit and looks to the future of social security.

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