

system as we know it? Or is he or she trying to diminish the reputation of the system with the public, so that when the right time comes to make changes to it, even small ones that in fact reduce benefits or change the rules for beneficiaries, those affected will be less likely to feel that something good is being taken away from them?

While step one would soften public support for the system by making it seem unreliable, step two would apply a classic strategy of divide and conquer. Recipients could be split apart in this way.

The first group he defined as those already receiving Social Security benefits and (although Buchanan did not include them, his ideological heirs would) those nearing the age when they could begin to collect. These current recipients and those close to retirement (some said within ten years; more recently politicians on the right have suggested five years) should be reassured that *their* benefits would not be cut. This tactic Buchanan referred to as “paying off” existing claims. The reasoning behind it is vintage public choice analysis: as the citizens most attentive to any change in the system, they were the ones who would fight the hardest to preserve it. Getting them out of the struggle to preserve the system would greatly enfeeble the remaining coalition (to say nothing of the resentment their departure would cause among those who found they were being denied something others had secured for themselves).³⁶

The second group, Buchanan coached, consisted of high earners. The plan here would be to suggest that they be taxed at higher rates than others to get their benefits, thus sully the image of Social Security as an insurance program in the minds of the wealthy by making it look more like now-unpopular means-tested income transfer programs popularly understood as “welfare.” Progressives would likely fall for a proposal to make the wealthiest pay more, not realizing the damage that could do to Social Security’s support among group two. And if the message was repeated enough, such that the wealthy began to believe that others are not paying their fair share, they in turn would also become less opposed to altering the program.³⁷

The third group would consist of younger workers. They needed to be constantly reminded that their payroll deductions were providing “a tremendous welfare subsidy” to the aged.³⁸