

increase Medicare premiums was one of the reasons he alleged for the veto that has shut down the government—and never mind that he himself, in his own budget, would countenance a similar increase.

We've said some of this before; it gets more serious. If the Democrats play the Medicare card and win, they will have set back for years, for the worst of political reasons, the very cause of rational government in behalf of which they profess to be behaving. Politically, they will have helped to lock in place the enormous financial pressure that they themselves are first to deplore on so many other federal programs, not least the programs for the poor. That's the real default that could occur this year. In the end, the Treasury will meet its financial obligations. You can be pretty sure of that. The question is whether the president and the Democrats will meet or flee their obligations of a different kind. On the strength of the record so far, you'd have to be on flight.

You'll hear the argument from some that this is a phony issue; they contend that the deficit isn't that great a problem. The people who make this argument are whistling past a graveyard that they themselves most likely helped to dig. The national debt in 1980 was less than \$1 trillion. That was the sum of all the deficits the government had previously incurred—the whole two centuries' worth. The debt now, a fun-filled 15 years later, is five times that and rising at a rate approaching \$1 trillion a presidential term. Interest costs are a seventh of the budget, by themselves now a quarter of a trillion dollars a year and rising; we are paying not just for the government we have but for the government we had and didn't pay for earlier.

The blamesters, or some of them, will tell you Ronald Reagan did it, and his low-tax, credit-card philosophy of government surely played its part. The Democratic Congresses that ratified his budgets and often went him one better on tax cuts and spending increases played their part as well. Various sections of the budget are also favorite punching bags, depending who is doing the punching. You will hear it said that someone's taxes ought to be higher (generally someone else's), or that defense should be cut, or welfare, or farm price supports or the cost of the bureaucracy. But even Draconian cuts in any or all of these areas would be insufficient to the problem and, because dwelling on them is a way of pretending the real deficit-generating costs don't exist, beside the point as well.

What you don't hear said in all this talk of which programs should take the hit, since the subject is so much harder politically to confront, is that the principal business of the federal government has become elder-care. Aid to the elderly, principally through Social Security and Medicare, is now a third of all spending and half of all for other than interest on the debt and defense. That aid is one of the major social accomplishments of the past 30 years; the poverty rate for the elderly is now, famously, well below the rate for the society as a whole. It is also an enormous and perhaps unsustainable cost that can only become more so as the baby-boomers shortly begin to retire. How does the society deal with it?

The Republicans stepped up to this as part of their proposal to balance the budget. About a fourth of their spending cuts would come from Medicare. It took guts to propose that. You may remember the time, not that many months ago, when the village wisdom was that, whatever else they proposed, they'd never take on Medicare this way. There were too many votes at stake. We don't mean to suggest by this that their proposal with regard to Medicare is perfect—it most emphatically is not, as we ourselves

have said as much at some length is this space. So they ought to be argued with, and ways should be found to take the good of their ideas while rejecting the bad.

But that's not what the president and congressional Democrats have done. They've trashed the whole proposal as destructive, taken to the air waves with a slick scare program about it, championing themselves as noble defenders of those about to be victimized. They—the Republicans—want to take away your Medicare; that's the insistent PR message that Democrats have been drumming into the elderly and the children of the elderly all year. The Democrats used to complain that the Republicans used wedge issues; this is the super wedge. And it's wrong. In the long run, if it succeeds, the tactic will make it harder to achieve not just the right fiscal result but the right social result. The lesson to future politicians will be that you reach out to restructure Medicare at your peril. The result will be to crowd out of the budget other programs for less popular or powerful constituencies—we have in mind the poor—that the Democrats claim they are committed to protect.

There's a way to get the deficit down without doing enormous social harm. It isn't rocket science. You spread the burden as widely as possible. Among much else, that means including the broad and, in some respects, inflated middle-class entitlements in the cuts. That's the direction in which the president ought to be leading and the congressional Democrats following. To do otherwise is to hide, to lull the public and to perpetuate the budget problem they profess to be trying to solve. Let us say it again: If that's what happens, it will be the real default.

□ 2340

SPECIAL ORDERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. FOX of Pennsylvania). Under the Speaker's announced policy of May 12, 1995, and under a previous order of the House, the following Members will be recognized for 5 minutes each.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida [Mr. SCARBOROUGH] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Mr. SCARBOROUGH addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio [Ms. KAPTUR] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Ms. KAPTUR addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

A TURNING POINT IN THE NATION'S HISTORY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. DUNCAN] is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. DUNCAN. Mr. Speaker, I do not believe I will take the full 5 minutes, but I want to rise tonight to say that I believe that most people across this

country realize that we are at a real turning point in the history of this Nation. I believe that most people realize that, if we do not bring Federal spending under control and put our fiscal house in order now, that we are going to face very severe economic problems in the near future. If we do not do this now, we will never do it unless probably it is too later to make any real difference.

Mr. Speaker, in that regard we often hear speakers say that we are doing this for our children and grandchildren and certainly that is true, but I think it is also accurate to say that we are doing it for the people who are in the prime of their lives right now because we are going to have extremely difficult economic problems and financial problems in the next 6, or 8, or 10 years, if not sooner, if we do not act now.

Mr. Speaker, already the President's own Medicare trustees have said that Medicare will be broke in about 6 years if we do not make major changes now., so that is why we passed a bill a few weeks ago allowing or giving huge increases in Medicare spending but which does slow the growth of Medicare to about twice the rate of inflation, instead of three or four times the rate, in which it does more to fight waste, fraud, and abuse. Even President Clinton said in his meeting with Speaker GINGRICH in New Hampshire, one of the first things he said was that we have to slow the rate of growth in Medicare.

One of the most fascinating things though, Mr. Speaker, that I saw, and I wanted to call this to the attention of my colleagues tonight, appeared in the Washington Post today. Now all of us know that the Washington Post at times acts or seems to act as the house organ for the Democratic Party, and so that is what made it so, I think, amazing, even that they wrote the lead editorial that they had today, and in that editorial the Washington Post said this. The budget deficit is the central problem of the Federal Government and one from which many of the country's other most difficult problems flow, and then the Post went on to say this:

Bill Clinton and the congressional Democrats were handed an unusual chance this year to deal constructively with the effect of Medicare on the deficit, and they blew it. The chance came in the form of the congressional Republican plan to balance the budget over seven years. Some other aspects of that plan deserved to be resisted, but the Republican proposal to get at the deficit partly by confronting the cost of Medicare deserved support. The Democrats, led by the president, chose instead to present themselves as Medicare's great protectors. They have shamelessly used the issue, demagogued on it, because they think that's where the votes are and the way to derail the Republican proposals generally. The president was still doing it this week.

In addition I have a couple of other things I would like to call some attention to that also appeared today. Dan Thomasson, who is the vice president for Scripps-Howard, an editor of the Scripps-Howard news service, wrote