To sow public doubts about Social Security and other federal old-age programs, one would need to erode their bases of support. This case study describes a year-long editorial campaign by *The Kansas City Star* that argued repeatedly for retrenchment of federal old-age programs and essentially promoted the policy agenda of the Concord Coalition. Generational inequity was a strong series theme. Readers, especially young people, were recruited to participate in public events that manufactured quotable support for the paper’s stance. Throughout, shrill and unflattering portrayals of age-group interests did little to advance civic understanding of policy issues or forestall intergenerational tensions.

Key Words: Social Security, Concord Coalition, News media

The 1997 report of the Advisory Council on Social Security listed several major areas of concern about the long-term financing of the program (DHHS, 1997). One of these concerns was the erosion of public confidence in the viability of Social Security, particularly among younger people. Those who track opinion polls on this subject draw a distinction between the public’s confidence in Social Security and their support for the program. Low confidence may be “a gut reaction to a pollster’s question rather than a carefully formed judgment” (Reno & Friedland, 1997, p. 193). By contrast, public support for Social Security and for old-age programs generally had remained high into the 1990s. This support has been based on positive perceptions about recipient deservingness, program effectiveness, and benefit to the self-interests of adults at all ages (Cook & Barrett, 1992). These bases, however, also suggest how public support could erode.

Anyone seeking to shrink the size and scope of the federal government—for whatever reasons, ideologiocal or economic—cannot overlook the large category of welfare-state spending, of which old-age programs are the major part. To sow political doubts about these popular programs one would need to lay an ax to the bases of their support, as identified by Cook and Barrett (1992). Recipients would need to be characterized as undeserving. The programs should be seen as unworkable, if not now, then in the future. And citizens should come to doubt their own self-interest in the programs. Appeals about the future flaws and inequities of programs would be most effectively targeted to those with the least immediate stake, young adults. This agenda, of course, could be pursued in various ways.

This article will describe the promotion, in one locality, of public distrust in Social Security and old-age programs generally, a promotion designed with special appeal to younger adults. What follows is a case study of a year-long editorial campaign by a major metropolitan newspaper, *The Kansas City Star*. It illustrates how arguments were framed to influence public opinion about federal spending, especially the large social insurance programs that the federal government has organized to provide financial support and health care in later life. These programs come under periodic review and scrutiny, and their level of public support is crucial. How the public understands and regards these matters is every bit as important to their viability as the technical expertise of program administrators and the foresight of policy makers (Yankelovich, 1991). The sentiments of citizens in this regard are very much worth contention.

I will show how a newspaper, in order to arouse its readers about federal budget deficits, staged informational events that “demonstrated” that the public favors retrenchment of federal programs for old age. The campaign repeatedly returned to certain themes, among them: the warning that America faces a fiscal crisis, the conviction that offending budget deficits can nevertheless be controlled, and the need to stir feckless politicians to action. One particularly strong theme of the series was “generational victimhood”—the inequity of present and future policies and their unfairness to younger people. With this motif,
an otherwise dry and technical set of issues was cast as a morality play about the American dream.

Throughout, this report will adhere to common usage of the word “generation.” Whereas the term can connote groups in a familial lineage with one another, the sources cited here use generation to designate population age groups rather than kin relations. References to material from The Kansas City Star are listed separately and in chronological order at the end of this article. In some cases, author attributions for unsigned editorials have come from the paper’s online archive. In addition, many items from the editorial campaign have been collected into a site on the World Wide Web: www.kcstar.com/opinion/debt/crisis.htm.

Background

_Crisis, Generational Equity, Entitlements_

The Star’s editorial campaign was a short spell in what has been a long-running argument over the form of American social welfare policy. The United States shares with other capitalist democracies the trait that its welfare state programs are largely oriented to provision for old age (Myles, 1989). Since the 1930s, conservative critics who would limit government intervention to residualist or “safety net” programs have opposed the social insurance model that organizes Social Security and Medicare (Marmor, Mashaw, & Harvey, 1990). This ongoing argument has what can be called an “issue culture” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) to which the partisans of limited government have added three idea “packages” in the last twenty years. These would be prominent elements in The Star’s series.

First, there is the “crisis” package. Since the 1970s, the Social Security program has encountered a set of program difficulties, unforeseen economic circumstances, and now demographic projections that have warranted attention to its short- and long-run financing. The critics of Social Security have repeatedly seized upon these developments to characterize the system as being in a continual “crisis” (Marmor et al., 1990). The crisis package has been creatively remodeled through time to apply in both situations of deficit and surplus, thus revealing that the very principles of the program are the true target of the persistent critique—that retrenchment, rather than reform, is what is wanted (Marmor, Cook, & Scher, 1997).

The ongoing bid to undermine public confidence acquired a new idea package in the 1980s. Philosophical questions about the proper role of government and practical questions about program affordability were joined with a moral dimension in the issue of “generational equity.” The term invokes the idea that opportunities and resources should be fairly distributed across the different generations. However, in this context, the concept was forensically narrowed to apply to public, specifically federal, spending on older people that was deemed to be inequitable to younger people both now and in the future. This rhetorical gambit emerged from both the policy community and the academic community, with figures in the latter suggesting what voices in the former stated flat out—that the old benefit at the expense of the young (Cook, Marshall, Marshall, & Kaufmann, 1994). Advocates for social insurance programs for older Americans moved to refute the charge (e.g., Kingson, Hirshhorn, & Cornman, 1986), but the powerful image of greedy seniors had now entered the issue culture of federal budget making (Quadagno, 1989). Nevertheless, public support for old-age programs remained high (Cook & Barrett, 1992), though the periodic “crises” seemed to ratchet down confidence in the programs’ future (Friedland, 1994).

By the 1990s, the peril of welfare state spending was being enunciated in segments of the policy community as an “entitlement crisis” that threatened future generations. Of this new language, one columnist wrote: “Times change. We don’t worry about Social Security anymore. We worry about ‘entitlements.’ Of course, Social Security is by far the biggest ‘entitlement,’ bigger than No. 2 (Medicare) and No. 3 (Medicaid) combined” (Kaus, 1994, p. 6). For those who favored retrenchment, the emphasis on entitlements could only have been a happy development. Whereas the term has legal, theoretical, and budgetary meanings (Quadagno, 1996), only the last connotation—entitlements as mandatory federal spending—was invoked to argue the urgency of reform. Moreover, “entitlement” conveys an idea of self-interested demands upon government and its taxpayers (see Peterson, 1982a). Rather than refer to specific programs that are known entities—Medicare, Social Security, veterans benefits—these can be subsumed in a word that brings to mind a presumptuous claim on scarce resources.

The “entitlement crisis” package acquired official sponsorship in 1994 and 1995 during much-noted deliberations by the congressional Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement and Tax Reform, also known as the Kerrey–Danforth Commission. The panel was a megaphone for the twin contentions that entitlement spending is generationally unfair and out of control. Quadagno (1996) has reviewed the factual basis of the commission’s themes and found them arguable, confounded with an overheated tone that only thwarts reasoned public discussion.

What is the motive for stressing an entitlement crisis and generational inequities? One can understand the durable critique of the welfare state residualists as ideologically based in philosophical and moral ideas about what is best for America. These ideas made headway throughout the 1980s among a public that was anxious about the economy and insecure about the future (Marmor et al., 1990). _The Kansas City Star_ introduced its editorial campaign in this high-minded way, as an effort to point national policy in a sound direction. The readers who were drawn in to echo the editorial line likewise stressed their concern for the nation’s future.

This public spiritedness notwithstanding, there are those who stand to gain if federal income and health programs for old age are shifted to the private sphere. One organization that prominently packaged the
charge of generational inequity in the 1980s had prospered, at one point, "with most of the funding coming from Social Security and Medicare's prime private-sector competitors: banks, insurance companies, defense contractors, and health care corporations" (Quadagno, 1989, p. 360). If the current siege on old-age programs (via the looming "entitlement crisis") would succeed in dismantling Social Security, the profit opportunity is clear. Said one principal of a money management firm, "You could be staring at 130 million new accounts" (Lieberman, 1997, p. 13).

Whereas opinion leaders and pundits may not personally profit from their stands, "many of the people making the loudest case for privatizing Social Security or balancing the budget have some connection to brokerage houses and banks" (Judis, 1997, p. 24). However, principled is money the views of opinion leaders, it is money from the financial services industry that can amplify their voices.

**The Kansas City Star and the Concord Coalition: "Our Crushing Debt"**

Late in 1995 the Editorial Board of The Kansas City Star launched what would become a year-long project to inform its readers about the "fiscal crisis" facing America due to annual federal budget deficits and a rising federal debt. The Kansas City Star is the sole major daily newspaper in a metropolitan market of 1.4 million people, the 25th largest in the nation, reporting a contemporary daily circulation of 325,000 and 422,000 on Sundays (Editor & Publisher, 1996). The project had all the appearance of an exercise of "public" or "civic" journalism, a new movement among news organizations to develop citizen awareness and enrich public life (Hoyt, 1995; Shepard, 1994). The series would use the techniques of public journalism, such as town-hall forums, reader input, and participatory discussions (Charity, 1995).

The insistence on bringing down federal spending, deficits, and the debt was not a new editorial direction for The Star. And the issue was timely. Discontent about the economy had been rising, especially among the middle class (Barlett & Steele, 1992; Madrick, 1995), even though there was moderate economic growth in 1995. An ascendant Republican Party now controlled both houses of Congress and had moved balanced budgets and tax and spending cuts to the top of the legislative agenda. Clashes with President Clinton over budgets led to two government shutdowns late in the year. And looming over these battles about federal spending was the presidential election of 1996.

The Star’s longtime emphasis on federal fiscal responsibility was well in step with current events. What was new in late 1995 was the newspaper’s alliance with the Concord Coalition.

The project kicked off on successive Sundays (November 26 and December 3, 1995), when the Opinion section (editorial pages) devoted a pair of articles on each day to the balanced-budget proposals of the Concord Coalition. Organized around entitlement cuts, its “Zero Deficit Plan” would balance the federal budget by 2002. The December 3 articles promoted two of the new project’s events. The article by Rich Hood, editorial page editor, explicitly endorsed (with some reservations) the Concord Coalition’s proposals. “On the editorial page we have long believed that the soaring federal debt is a threat to the way of life we hold dear.” Hood applauded the Concord Coalition’s analysis of the danger, as well as the caliber of the group’s leaders. “We are working with the Concord Coalition because it is nonpartisan, it is highly respected and it possesses considerable expertise and credibility on this subject.”

Hood’s column went on to promote a public forum on balancing the budget that would be held the next morning and would be co-hosted by The Star’s Editorial Board and the Concord Coalition. The other Opinion section article on December 3, by Stephen Winn, deputy editorial page editor, introduced a worksheet exercise that was printed in the paper that day. This worksheet was based on a budget-balancing game, “Debtbusters 2002,” that was developed by the Concord Coalition. Readers were encouraged to choose among the list of policy options toward a balanced federal budget and mail the page back to The Star.

With these two inaugural events, the project was underway. Its articles and columns would be unified with a logo (“Our Crushing Debt”), and mentions of the Concord Coalition would be prominent in the paper. A search of the paper’s online library for the term “Concord Coalition” returned a list of 10 documents for 1994 and 16 for 1995, but 60 documents for 1996.

Who was this new editorial partner of The Kansas City Star? The organization was unfailingly described throughout the series as "a nonpartisan group that supports fiscal responsibility." Contemporary documents on the Concord Coalition’s website (www.concordcoalition.org) confirm the fiscal emphasis, but one clearly couched in generational rhetoric. From the mission statement: “The mission of the Concord Coalition is to end deficit spending in order to preserve our economy and the American dream for our children and grandchildren.” The home page (January 1997) began: “The Concord Coalition is a nonpartisan, grassroots movement to eliminate the deficit and bring entitlements down to a level that’s fair to all generations.”

The Concord Coalition—recalling the “Revolutionary forerunners” who sent out the call and took a stand—was founded in 1992. The founding co-chairs were two former U.S. senators, the late Paul E. Tsongas and Warren B. Rudman, along with Peter C. Peterson, an investment banker and former commerce secretary in the Nixon administration. Peterson, the president of the Concord Coalition, also served on the Kerrey–Danforth entitlement commission. Among the critics of Social Security, Peterson is long to the fight (Peterson, 1982a, 1982b, 1987) and his latest book is titled, *Will America Grow Up Before It Grows Old? How the Coming Social Security Crisis Threatens You, Your Family, and Your Country* (1996). In the marketing of policy, it is hard to tell where the ideas of
Peterson end and the positions of the Concord Coalition begin.

According to 1996 Concord Coalition documents, what ails the American economy is a low rate of savings that holds back investments and reduces productivity. To rectify this, the nation must cut consumption and the borrowing required by federal budget deficits. There are many ways to eliminate the deficit but, because entitlement programs allegedly drive the deficit and will do so into the future, these entitlements must be cut. The largest such programs are Social Security and Medicare, hence the Concord Coalition’s urgent warning that Social Security and Medicare spending will wreck the economy and threaten the “American Dream” (cf. the Concord Coalition’s New York Times ad of October 15, 1996). The prescriptions of the Concord Coalition, embodied in its Zero Deficit Plan of 1995, were not limited to entitlement cuts (read Social Security and Medicare) but they were the major part. The “centerpiece” was a plan to means-test entitlement income.

To focus political will, the Concord Coalition has projected that entitlement spending will someday absorb all federal revenues. If this were not sufficient spur to action, the Concord Coalition unabashedly plays the “generational inequity” card. The preamble of the group’s inaugural statement said that “government spending favors older, more affluent Americans at the expense of younger people under economic stress.” In 1992 co-chair Paul Tsongas warned: “Generational war. It won’t be pretty.” The Coalition’s first of “Facts You Should Know” says: “Generation X (born 1961-1981) is falling behind the standard of living enjoyed by the generation before it at the same age”—something not seen since the defeated Confederate South. A fax alert of May 1996 was titled, “Listen Up, Generation X” (“You’ve got good reason to worry about your economic future, and you’d better start doing something about it.”)

At the time, the Peterson/Concord Coalition analysis of, and proposals for, America’s future were open to argument and dispute, and their tone was characterized as alarmist (e.g., Ball & Aaron, 1993; Burtless, 1996; Cassidy, 1997; Judis, 1997; Kingson & Schulz, 1997; Quadagno, 1996; Uchitelle, 1996). Doubts about the Concord Coalition, however, were not shared with readers of The Kansas City Star. As the editorial campaign proceeded, the assumptions and details of the Zero Deficit Plan would not be evaluated so much as they would be promoted.

The Star’s December 4 town meeting on the federal budget drew 500 people. Present to speak were Peter Peterson of the Concord Coalition and former U.S. Senator Jack Danforth of Missouri. The paper reported the forum in a news article and an editorial on December 5 and a business-page column on December 6. The news article by Campbell recounted how the forum spotlighted “this ‘entitlement cancer’ that, if not addressed soon, will radically change the face of the country. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and federal retirement programs are all frighteningly out of control,” said the speakers. The nation is on an unsustainable path which, if unchecked, will see entitlements and interest on the debt consuming the entire federal budget by 2012. The politicians are in denial. “If nothing is done, Peterson said, the nation faces an impossible tax burden that could lead to ‘intergenerational war.’” The forum concluded with a vox populi ratification of the Concord Coalition strategy: “At the end of the forum, editorial page editor Rich Hood asked for a show of hands from people willing to put entitlements on the table. Virtually everyone raised a hand.”

According to the editorial by Winn, Peterson discussed the looming burden of aging Baby Boomers as “an ‘absolute explosion’ in people over 85 who will need enormous amounts of medical care.” Danforth pointed out that the budget won’t be balanced by eliminating waste and fraud; hard choices must be made. The business-page columnist (Jerry Heaster) also identified “mandated spending” on Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and military and civil service retirement programs as the course that needs changing. If not, he warned,

The eventual solution will involve a gradual intergenerational power shift. The post-1950s generation will come of political age when they realize how badly they’re being used by their elders. They’ll then take political power and at long last move to protect their own self-interest.

Following up, the business columnist (December 10) called the Concord Coalition’s efforts at the public forum “laudable,” but argued, for the sake of “our kids and our grandkids,” that the group should be pushing for radical reform of Social Security, such as Chilean-style privatization.

The other kick-off event was the worksheet exercise printed on December 3. The task for readers would be to balance the federal budget within seven years by finding $700 billion in spending cuts or tax increases from a menu of policy proposals that were “developed with assistance from Concord Coalition staff members.” The list of budget options each carried a dollar figure in billions by which the deficit would be reduced or increased (Table 1). The accompanying article discussed the options.

As the worksheet was constructed, and consistent with the message of the December 4 budget forum, the category of “Entitlement Spending” held the greatest savings. The text explained that “less than a fourth of these payments are based on economic need.” A single option, means-testing of entitlement programs (essentially Social Security and Medicare, though the worksheet is not explicit about this) promised $314.9 billion in deficit reduction over seven years. Thus, at one stroke, a reader could accomplish 45% of the deficit reduction goal (and endorse the centerpiece of the Zero Deficit Plan). Two other policy options involving Social Security—reducing the cost-of-living adjustment and raising the retirement age—would save $132.3 billion; an option to raise Medicare Part B fees would save $110.7 billion. Altogether, these choices would take a reader 80% of the way toward a balanced budget. Policy options from

### Domestic “Discretionary” Spending
(Billions of Dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cancel NASA’s space station</td>
<td>$13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce funding for energy research and conservation</td>
<td>$6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate grants to states for Clean Water Act compliance</td>
<td>$14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate Commerce Department</td>
<td>$7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce health research funding for universities and nonprofits by more than 10 percent</td>
<td>$7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut and eliminate range of education programs</td>
<td>$56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate funding for the arts and humanities, including public broadcasting</td>
<td>$7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce range of social service programs, including child care and elderly care</td>
<td>$11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce funding for anti-drug efforts</td>
<td>$11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce funding for airports, highways and mass transit</td>
<td>$24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate community development block grants</td>
<td>$24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce or eliminate housing programs, low-income energy assistance and rural development programs</td>
<td>$35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate grants to states for Clean Water Act compliance</td>
<td>$14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate funding for historic preservation and public broadcasting</td>
<td>$7.3</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate community development block grants</td>
<td>$24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce or eliminate housing programs, low-income energy assistance and rural development programs</td>
<td>$35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce or eliminate variety of tax breaks and subsidies, including below-cost timber sales and all of Amtrak subsidy</td>
<td>$13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip pay raises next year for federal civilian employees</td>
<td>$10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce spending on congressional operations by 10 percent</td>
<td>$2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### National Security and International Affairs
(Billions of Dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cut foreign aid spending roughly in half</td>
<td>$23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase defense spending, including 20 additional B-2 aircraft</td>
<td>$43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce naval forces, eliminating third Seawolf submarine and 2 aircraft carriers</td>
<td>$15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide range of reductions in air power</td>
<td>$45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce Army troop strength by two “light” divisions</td>
<td>$16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of other military cuts affecting pay, benefits and technology</td>
<td>$22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce strategic systems, including nuclear weapons and missile defense systems</td>
<td>$9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trim and consolidate intelligence operations</td>
<td>$7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Entitlement Spending
(Billions of Dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce entitlements to families with incomes above $40,000</td>
<td>$314.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat all non-means-tested entitlements as ordinary income for tax purposes</td>
<td>$281.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise Medicare Part B deductibles, copayments and premiums</td>
<td>$110.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce federal employee retirement benefits</td>
<td>$37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrict eligibility for veterans’ disability benefits</td>
<td>$7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce cost-of-living adjustments in certain benefit programs, including Social Security</td>
<td>$59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradually raise Social Security retirement age to 68 and “early retirement” age to 65</td>
<td>$72.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional reductions in Medicare and Medicaid programs</td>
<td>$46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reforms and reduce benefits in work and welfare programs</td>
<td>$80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce student loan subsidies</td>
<td>$18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce farm subsidies and regulations</td>
<td>$31.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Government Revenue
(Billions of Dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase fees for federal resources and services such as air traffic control and nuclear waste disposal</td>
<td>$29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase gasoline tax by 25 cents per gallon</td>
<td>$108.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impose a comprehensive energy tax</td>
<td>$148.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impose a 5 percent value-added tax (sales tax), excluding food, housing and medical care</td>
<td>$604.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significantly boost excise taxes on tobacco and alcohol</td>
<td>$98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase top corporate income tax rate by one percentage point</td>
<td>$23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase all individual tax rates by one or two percentage points</td>
<td>$209.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit home mortgage deductions to interest paid on $300,000 for a single home</td>
<td>$56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impose pollution taxes</td>
<td>$272.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TAX CUTS
(Billions of Dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give a $500 per child tax credit for children in families earning up to $75,000 a year</td>
<td>$-58.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut capital gains taxes by allowing people to exclude 50 percent of capital gains and to index for inflation</td>
<td>$-65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase in tax deductions of up to $10,000 a year for post-secondary education and training expenses, restricted to families with incomes under $120,000</td>
<td>$-40.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TOTAL DEFICIT REDUCTION
(Billions of Dollars)

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the other spending categories of this exercise—Domestic Discretionary Spending, National Security and International Affairs—did not even approach the savings to be had by cutting entitlements.

Readers were directed to mail their worksheets back to The Star, which followed up with two articles. The first (December 17) was an interim editorial noting that over 1,100 worksheets had been returned. People of all ages had sent in plans, yet:

It has been particularly gratifying to receive worksheets from students who were asked to do the budget-balancing exercise in their classrooms. Younger people need to be aware that they could be hurt for decades to come by the irresponsible choices that are being made today.

The exercise was summarized on January 14, 1996, by which time 1,300 worksheets had been received and compiled by Concord Coalition volunteers. The first specific conclusion highlighted in the article was this: "There was overwhelming agreement among our Debtbusters that entitlement spending must be sharply curtailed." In all, the extensive individual effort that went into completing these worksheets revealed choices that were, according to the Concord Coalition’s state director, "similar to those that have been made in Debtbuster games around the country." The worksheets had produced their designed result.

Following the town-hall forum and the worksheet exercise, the two further public events of the series, "Our Crushing Debt," were stagings of the Debtbusters game itself, the first on April 13, 1996. Readers were invited to participate through announcements and editorial columns in the Opinion section on March 30, April 3, April 5, and April 6. Each repeated the same essential information: the game would be held on a Saturday morning at a suburban high school with seating limited to 120 members of the public; the exercise would be informative about federal budget deficits and the choices involved in balancing the budget; The Star would co-host the game with the Concord Coalition. One of the lengthier invitations (April 3) indicated that the game would be run by Bob Bixby, who developed the game for the Concord Coalition (other stories had named Bixby as the national field director of the group). The organization, it was noted, relies on such exercises to update its Zero Deficit Plan.

The invitations made the game seem accessible to the public with this assurance: "You do not need detailed knowledge of the federal budget to participate" (April 3 and 5). Written material on budget options would be supplied by the co-sponsors. Perhaps to underline the user-friendliness of the game, Stephen Winn on April 6 emphasized the ease of budget balancing. Recalling the worksheet exercise of December, he wrote:

... many people were surprised to find the job wasn’t as hard as they had expected. Looking over the chart of possible spending and tax options, some of my colleagues on the Editorial Page were even more scornful than usual about Washington. What’s all the fuss about? Why are politicians whining about how difficult this is? Many of our readers came to the same conclusion. . . . Some wrote us to say that they had balanced the budget without even breaking a sweat.

Winn confides that "I didn’t have much trouble balancing the budget, either."

The first of two reports about the game was an editorial (April 16). It recounted how the 138 attendees (divided into 14 groups) were to role-play as members of Congress. The goal of the game was to reach a $700 billion deficit reduction goal by selecting reductions from broad spending categories or from a menu of revenue increases and tax cuts. (In this, the game was similar to the mail-in worksheet of December 1995.) All but one group met the $700 billion goal. The editorial noted the enthusiasm of the players, and also the difficulties and emotions involved in working out realistic deficit reduction plans. "Proposed changes in entitlement programs proved to be particularly controversial in the game," with many older players apprehensive about reductions in Social Security and Medicare, whereas "some younger people insisted that unless some changes were made there would be nothing left for them when they retired decades from now."

The second report about the game (April 21) took the form of three players’ first-person accounts about their experience. Two of the writers stressed that the task had been doable, saying that achieving the deficit reduction target "was much easier . . . than I had anticipated" (Eileen Armstrong) and "was not a problem for me" (Clark Ullom). The third writer said that "completing the game was not easy, but it was possible" (Craig Kenworthy). All three said that the earnestness of the players should be an example to politicians in Washington. By way of rationale for their groups’ cuts, two writers described specific instances of government spending on undeserving people or pointless programs, and one writer framed the task in age-based terms. This 34-year-old attorney (Kenworthy) named his group’s first budget-cutting principle: "Put everything on the table. Everything, including Social Security and Medicare." To succeed, he wrote, beneficiaries of Social Security and Medicare, military retirees, and veterans must “share the pain.” No other age group was singled out as needing to face their civic responsibility in this matter.

The game was not scheduled again until October, but other Debtbuster-themed articles did appear over the summer. One (July 29) confirmed politicians’ lack of concern about budget balancing. The Star tried to enlist candidates for the U.S. Senate in Kansas to complete the Debtbuster exercise, thereby revealing for comparison purposes their budget philosophies. Only one of four candidates took the challenge. "Politics as usual," the article concluded.

Another article was part of a series on the top ten issues facing teens in the Kansas City area. The June 23 installment (Sunday, front page) dealt with the national debt, said by the paper to be the sixth-most important teen concern. The article reported how
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young fund-raisers tend to measure success by the
for expressions of generational victimhood ("Our gen-
the teens, the article pointed out that such projects
washes, fund raising at rock concerts, and even fast-
ing, all to make donations to the U.S. Treasury to re-
duce the federal debt. While noting the sincerity of
the teens, the article pointed out that such projects
(e.g., a shopping bag of pennies brought to the
steps of the U.S. Capitol) are publicity driven: "These
young fund-raisers tend to measure success by the
number of media interviews they snare." Despite the
skeptical tone, the article was an ample opportunity
for expressions of generational victimhood ("Our gen-
eration will be paying the bills"). Said one teen:

When I grow up I want to be a dentist and have a
top-quality life. I want a nice car, a nice home and
clean clothes. None of us will be able to afford it if
we're paying off interest on the national debt.

This story was followed up two days later (June
25) with a feature in the pull-out "Teen Star" section.
Here the paper put questions to seven "teen advi-
sors" to learn their views on federal spending and
deficits. The teens were led by questions that in-
cluded: "Do you guys get cranked at (older) gen-
erations for not doing something about this?" and
"Should we cut how much the government spends
on Social Security?"

"Generation X: You Can Shrink the Debt"

The second public game was played on October
12, and was likewise preceded by announcements in
the paper. The first (October 1) ran as a box on the
op-ed page. Under the title, "Generation X: You can
shrink the debt," it began:

Confused about your future? Wondering what all the
talk about the national debt and balancing the federal
budget has to do with you?
Get answers and try your hand at balancing the
budget. See what it's like to be in charge in Wash-
ton. Learn more about the federal budget and the
choices your elected officials make.

After repeating the sort of details covered in the April
announcements (The Kansas City Star would team
with the Concord Coalition, the game would be played
at a suburban high school), the invitation continued:
"This time we want area young people (roughly age
18–30) to participate." Readers were to call the paper
by October 8 in order to reserve seats.

Perhaps due to a slow advance sign up, a second,
longer announcement ("Help Us Balance the Bud-
get") ran on October 10. This editorial reviewed the
problem of the soaring federal debt, the educational
and informational value of the game, and other stan-
dard details. Readers were again assured that "ex-

tensive prior knowledge of the federal budget is not
necessary." Only toward the end was it noted that
"high school students, college students, and educators
are particularly welcome at this session."

Between these two announcements, The Star also
ran a long piece in its October 6 Sunday Opinion
section that was a thorough catechism of the socio-
economic victimhood of Generation X. The writer,
Lajean Rau, identified as a 26-year-old, drew on
sources such as the ubiquitous Peter Peterson and the
Concord Coalition to document the scary prospect
for young people "who want their fair share of the
American dream but whose future looks more like
an American nightmare." Their financial future "looks
bleak on all fronts"; "we begin to see the potential for
generational warfare." Even now, "The social institu-
tions that were supposed to be there for them—
marriage, schools, neighborhoods—have been allowed
to rot before their eyes." Generation X, the writer said,
has got to push politicians to make tough decisions.
The game played on October 12 was reported some-
what more extensively than the previous one, even
though the roughly 50 participants were less than half
the previous attendance. There was a local news story
on the following day, Sunday, October 13; an edito-
rial on Tuesday, October 15; and, as in April, first-
person reflections on the next Sunday, October 20.

The next day's report (October 13) ran on the front
page of the Metropolitan section. The game was not
reported as a young person's event, despite the spe-
cific targeting, because older persons had attended
as well. Nevertheless, the story led with the theme of
generational victimhood:

What could possibly attract a teenager to a gray and
white windowless school cafeteria on a weekend
when a warm sun shines from a clear blue sky?

Busting debt.

"My generation has a $5 trillion debt already," said
15-year-old Matt Calcara, "and we haven't gotten
any benefits from it."

The article discussed the event in a general way:
game procedure, the $700 billion goal, the varying
results among nine working groups. The game again
was run by Bob Bixby of the Concord Coalition, "who
presents the game to dozens of groups throughout
the country." Bixby emphasized that "it's actually
hard to balance the budget... or it would have
been done by now." Yet, he said, most people do
reach a plan, making choices that would surprise
the politicians. The article went on: "Most of the sur-
prises come in the form of large cuts in Medicare and
Social Security, as well as tax increases, said Bixby....
Saturday's participants kept that theme alive."

The second report about the game was an edi-
torial that ran two days later (October 15). It was
heralded by a boxed teaser on the front page that
said: "Unless all are willing to sacrifice a little, gener-
tional warfare is inevitable as attempts to balance the
federal budget proceed." The editorial itself, attributed
by the online archive to Stephen Winn, ran under the
headline, "The younger generation confronts the na-
tional debt."

After setting the scene for the Debttbuster game,
Winn described a large percentage of the players as
teenagers and young adults, leaving unsaid the fact
that this had occurred by design. Then the age issue
is sharpened:
But with older players there as well, everyone soon discovered the potential for what some experts have called "generational warfare"—the clash between younger and older Americans in the years ahead over tax and spending policies.

Next, the editorial’s thesis:

It is important for today’s young people to understand that they have a particularly large stake in fiscal responsibility in Washington.

Unless significant policy changes are made in the next few years, they stand to inherit both an enormous federal debt and the even greater burden of financing increasingly expensive social programs as the Baby Boomers retire. Crippling tax increases early in the next century are a distinct possibility.

As the game was played, Winn continued, there were small savings to be had “by simply whittling away at so-called ‘domestic discretionary’ spending,” and defense cuts were problematic for many. There was also this particular difficulty for the day’s young protagonists:

And once the discussion shifted to possible cuts in large entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare, the younger players found particularly strong resistance from many of their elders.

The players in the latest game, perhaps in part because of their age differences [emphasis added], had a little more trouble than some other groups that have played Debtbusters this year.

The editorial then described the nine groups’ varying success at deficit reduction, but:

All of the groups on Saturday relied heavily on curtailment entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, federal pensions and agricultural subsidies. Five groups favored an across-the-board means test that would gradually reduce entitlement benefits for families as their incomes rose above $40,000 per year.

(The last option, again, was the Concord Coalition’s main proposal for reducing Social Security and Medicare costs.)

Winn concluded by observing that if the day’s Debtbusters had actually been members of Congress, “the special interests would be up in arms.” Liberals would decry this and conservatives would decry that and “there would be an incredible howl over changes in the entitlement programs.” And then, without irony, the editorial closed by nonetheless asserting the interests of one group:

Unless the country can come to terms with unsustainable deficit spending, the young people who spent a few hours on this exercise Saturday will face an uncertain future with both severely restricted government services and exorbitant tax rates.

The third summary of the game, via four first-person accounts, ran on Sunday, October 20. The short introduction said that the game had been “aimed at the area’s young people.” The four correspondent here ranged in age from 18 to 30, and all consciously interpreted Debtbusting in light of their generations’ identity.

The first writer (Linda Fatino Rooney), a paralegal, began explaining why she and her husband took “three precious hours” to play Debtbusters: “As I get older (I’m 30 now) and my daughter grows up (she almost 3), I’m scared by the growing national debt and fearful of an impending crisis as America’s largest segment of the population ages.” The writer, identifying herself as a liberal, reported gaining insight into budget options and the difficulties of coming to consensus. “It was clear, however, that most or all of the goal could be accomplished if the members of Congress and the president have the courage, strength, freedom, and will to do the job.” One needs to prioritize, said the writer, as we do at home in spending our time and discretionary income, “including planning for retirement because it is inconceivable to us that Social Security will significantly help support us in retirement.”

The second writer, a college junior (Joshua Brecke), found himself enlightened about his own political beliefs, about the workings of government, and about pressures on elected officials. He confides directly to generational self-interest in federal budget priorities:

While participating in this exercise, I realize that I am less concerned with what I believe to be the common good and more concerned with things that affect me personally.

I voted for cutting the federal employee benefits and the annual COLA [cost-of-living] increases because they don’t affect me. Then I voted against cuts in veterans’ programs and student loans because I am a veteran and a student.

The third writer (Robert Blakey) was a college freshman who began candidly: “Last weekend, The Star Editorial Board held a special ‘Gen X’ Debtbuster game at Shawnee Mission North High School. Unfortunately, people of that generation didn’t care enough to show up.” The writer recounted game process and debates among his mixed-age group. His group totalled up $890.6 billion in cuts, with more than $600 billion coming from entitlements, mostly from Social Security ($336.8 billion) and Medicare ($196.4 billion). Despite diverse viewpoints, he found himself, a conservative siding with one of his liberal group members. “That should tell Congress something: If kids can balance the budget and overcome their differences, so should you.”

The fourth writer (Chris Wiswell), a college senior and the president of his school’s Libertarian party, lauded “the sheer unbridled courage of the people who attended, the spirit of sacrifice that each was willing to show in order to save the future for ourselves, our children and our communities.” This in contrast to elected politicians, “none with the courage to do what a roomful of Kansas Citians did in the space of two hours—saving our future regardless of what the political implications might be.”
This writer struck the age chord soundly, first quoting other players' expressions of generational altruism: "I've got children, but why should other people be subsidizing their education?" and "I'm on a Stafford loan, but I would give it up in a minute if we could begin to cut our budget deficit." This was said as "we cut out student aid—my student aid." He continued:

As a human being, I'm concerned about the fact that entitlement programs such as Social Security are drawing bitter lines across the generations by making all young people pay for the health of all old people, with no concern for the family ties which are strained in the process.

The remainder of his article scored politicians' unwillingness to phase out the "role of government in many areas of our life"; cited the desire of both young and old "to see the role of government shrink and the liberty of man grow"; and concluded with the cry, "These lies must end. Vote Libertarian!"

This one week's reports thus capitalized one morning's meeting of a reported 50 people into (1) a story about ordinary, earnest citizens forming solutions toward a balanced budget, including large cuts in Social Security and Medicare, (2) an unvarnished editorial-page warning about inevitable generational warfare over government spending, and (3) accounts from four of "the area's young people" about the deficit burdens that their generation will bear.

The Debubusters game was not staged again, and the series "Our Crushing Debt" would conclude in January 1997, after further articles and editorial columns, with the recap printing of a special section. In December 1996 readers could find a Sunday-to-Sunday series of editorial columns that summarized the themes of the campaign and that continued to play the generational card. There was this at week's outset (December 15):

Throughout the year, as we pushed through this project, we were impressed to see young people in high school and college who understood the dangers our decades of spendthrift ways have created. Many of those young people are sounding more responsible in their approach to the problem than some of their elders.

On the following Sunday (December 22), Lajean Rau recycled generational grievance content from an earlier column on October 6 (both pieces had practically the same title): "Representatives of younger Americans have seen the future, and it doesn't look good." Regarding Social Security and Medicare (together "the world's biggest pyramid scheme"): "The whole arrangement seems terribly unfair. It promises increasing generational resentment."

Discussion

What happened here? A major daily newspaper for one year turned its editorial pages over to the agenda of an interest group, the Concord Coalition, whose highest priority is to curtail social insurance programs for old age and whose rhetorical tactics pit young against old. This hortative campaign was not limited to editorials. The newspaper invited the public to engage in federal budget-balancing exercises, fashioned by the Concord Coalition, that inevitably generated quotable assent for the editorial stance. At one such budget-balancing game, the paper specifically recruited young adults who, QED, asserted their generational interests. These views were then reported on the news pages and used editorially to stress the victimhood of young people at the hands of entitlement liberalism. This artifice amounted to journalistic puppetry.

At one level, The Kansas City Star can be seen to have conducted itself properly, even admirably. Daily newspapers have by tradition used their editorial pages to shape public sentiment toward the betterment of their communities. The series, "Our Crushing Debt," was clearly identified as an initiative of the Editorial Board. One can view the Editorial Board as having done what such bodies do—offer opinion. Disagreement about the content of that opinion is to be expected.

At the same time, the Debt series spilled out of the editorial pages into other sections of the paper and into public forums. As the paper covered its own activism, this sustained campaign bore the hallmarks of "public journalism" (Hoyt, 1995). The proponents of public journalism urge news organizations to drop their detachment—to engage citizens in deliberation about important issues, and so forge "public judgment" as the basis for democratic problem solving (Merritt, 1998; Yankelovich, 1991). It is not enough, proponents say, simply to focus public attention with information. As a further step, journalists should help readers "work through" the consequences of an issue's full range of options and the competing core values that need to be reconciled before stable, moral choices can result. The Star's series might have been just such a chautauqua had the paper not crossed over into advocacy—organizing not a process of deliberation but specific solutions—and so stepped beyond the role of "fair minded participant" (Merritt, 1998).

In repeatedly making its case for a balanced federal budget and how to get there, entire areas of content were not shared with readers. This "framing" technique—repeatedly emphasizing certain ideas and minimizing others—makes it difficult for inexpert readers to develop independent interpretation (Entman, 1991). I noted earlier that the premises of the Concord Coalition argument and its policy proposals are matters of wide dispute, yet The Star's yea-saying did not admit the Concord Coalition line to serious scrutiny. The rhetorical tactic was to raise and dismiss the arguments of others as "myths" (e.g., July 21, 1996; January 18, 1997). Nor would readers know about the interlocking organizations in which the Concord Coalition is enmeshed, their long campaign to privatize Social Security, and the self-interest of their financial backers (Lieberman, 1997). Readers would not know that Peter Peterson, the president of the Concord Coalition, is openly regarded as speaking for Wall Street (Uchitelle, 1996). The paper's ritual references to the
Concord Coalition as "nonpartisan" were accurate in that politicians from both parties have endorsed the group's agenda, but the term—suggesting objectivity and neutrality—obscures the group's strong, specific political agenda.

Substantively, many things were left unsaid during the series. In a fundamental mischaracterization, articles and editorials ignored the social insurance principle underlying Social Security and Medicare (see Kingson & Berkowitz, 1993). Rather, these systems were painted as income-support programs grown bloated with undeserving beneficiaries. "Less than a fourth of [entitlement] payments are based on economic need," noted the worksheet instructions of December 3, 1995. By sticking to the device of entitlement bundling, The Star rarely unpacked issues specific to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, veterans benefits, or "overgenerous" federal pensions; did not concede the successes of the respective programs; and did not help readers work through the probable impact of means-testing (the Concord Coalition centerpiece) on each program's goals. On this last point, the political, administrative, and practical objections to means-testing went unexamined, particularly the view, wellaired before the Kerrey-Danforth Commission, that such a test would prove to be a disincentive to workers' retirement savings—the exact opposite of the Concord Coalition's goal to increase national savings (Burtless, 1996; Kingson & Schulz, 1997; Passell, 1996).

The charge of generational inequity brought a high moral theme to the series: unless this entitlement injustice is addressed, "generational warfare is inevitable." Left unsaid was the fact that generational victimhood is a political preoccupation unique to the United States. Other advanced democracies (e.g., Canada) have been ushering welfare-state programs and lumpy age distributions into the next century without piercing alarms about generational warfare (Cook et al., 1994; Quadagno, 1989). The Star's concern for younger generations—"our children and grandparents"—did not extend to concrete suggestions for programs or market incentives to support the educational, employment, or family prospects of young adults. The American Dream, rather, would be conserved by lives lived in an era of limited government and reduced tax rates.

The Star's editorial campaign was limited not just in its depth and breadth, but also in the extent to which issues and themes were developed over the course of a year. The concluding editorials of December 1996 said nothing that had not already been said in the series inaugurals of November 1995. Material in between broke no new rhetorical ground and essentially retailed the positions available earlier from the Concord Coalition and the writings of its president. Even these positions, in outline, had been part of a decades-old conservative critique of welfare state spending (see Marmor et al., 1990). The series rehashed ideas rather than accumulating them.

The static quality of argument makes the series' public exercises—the mail-in worksheet, the Debttbuster games—appear all the more disingenuous. These exercises did not lead to updated policy proposals, but rather generated assent for the editorial stance. The circumstances of these events were controlled by their sponsors: "You do not need detailed knowledge of the federal budget to participate because printed materials on the various options will be available" (April 5). The Debttbuster games revealed little that had not been said in the editorial columns, but did succeed in delivering the conclusion that the federal budget can be balanced with the requisite entitlement cuts. The paper's reports even said that the outcomes were no surprise (January 14, October 13). As staged, the exercises ratified the editorials, on one occasion using the specific voice of youth.

Conclusion

Age politics and priorities are perfect topics for experiments in civic journalism. News organizations can marshal great resources to raise public consciousness and work through these issues, their consequences, and their moral dimensions. Yet the ethics of the form require attention to the "golden rule" for public journalism: "Journalism should advocate democracy without advocating particular solutions" (Charity, 1995, p. 146).

Were minds changed by this series? Its key trait was not analysis or dialogue, but repetition that reinforced the frame: "We have published scores of editorials dealing with the fiscal sanity theme along with 22 bylined staff analyses that focused on individual aspects of the debt problem" (December 15, 1996). Week after week the syllogism was offered to readers: The debt crisis threatens the American future; entitlement spending (i.e., Social Security, Medicare) drives the debt crisis; therefore Social Security and Medicare threaten the American future. Readers had to have noticed. In the advocacy of causes, Yankelovich (1991) points out, it is the quantity of publicity that counts. There is, however, no local polling data available to demonstrate changed sentiment about entitlement spending, so The Star's success at shaping opinion cannot be directly evaluated. Nor can it be known whether the series achieved its goals by affecting voter behavior during the 1996 election cycle.

Events have moved on. By 1998 the federal budget had gone into nominal surplus, thanks to a robust economy and the masking effect of Social Security revenues. Entitlements remained an editorial issue for The Kansas City Star and an advocacy issue for the Concord Coalition, but the focus for both had shifted to the privatization of Social Security. The Concord Coalition's Debttbusters 2002 game had been remodeled into one called Just Generations.

What may remain from the Debt series are public impressions that weaken support for old-age programs. News media are the primary source for people's information about such programs as Social Security (Reno & Friedland, 1997). The Star's persistent package about federal budgets and debt should raise concern about the collateral damage to public understanding of old-age programs and intergenerational relationships. To enlist readers' assent to budget cutting, The Kansas City Star characterized Social Secu-
rity and Medicare as "gimme" programs for the comfortable that dispense expendable benefits. This is a poor premise for the necessary civic dialogue about these programs' current role in American economic and social life and what that role should be in the decades ahead. To stir readers' moral sense, the series drew the interests of young and old as opposed. In this morality fable, older people (and soon-to-be-old Baby Boomers) were shown as cosseted and favored by federal spending, a weight upon the young. Ironically, The Star's fondness for this opposed casting sometimes left younger people sounding aggrieved, self-interested, and shrill. Both age-group portrayals are unflattering and more useful toward encouraging rather than forestalling the "intergenerational warfare" about which the series so darkly warned.

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