



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on February 9, 2016

Toxic Words

During this election year, we are destined to hear many words that are toxic in the way they misrepresent reality and substitute fantasies that can win votes.

One of these words is “entitlement.” To hear some politicians tell it, we are all entitled to all sorts of things, ranging from “affordable housing” to “a living wage.”

But the reality is that the human race is not entitled to anything, not even the food we need to stay alive. If we don’t produce food, we are just going to starve. If we don’t build housing, then we are not going to have housing, “affordable” or otherwise.



Particular individuals or groups can be given many things, to which politicians say they are “entitled,” only if other people are forced by the government to provide those things to people who don’t need to lift a finger to earn them. All the fancy talk about “entitlement” means simply forcing some people to work to produce things for other people, who have no obligation to work.

It gets worse. If we are all “entitled” to things, irrespective of whether we produce anything ourselves, then the question becomes: Why are some people getting so much more than others?

People who are producing nothing can feel a sense of grievance against those who are producing much, and being rewarded for it, if our basis for receiving economic benefits is supposed to be what we are all “entitled” to, rather than what we have worked to earn.

One of the most misleading uses of the notion of entitlement is to say that people who paid into Social Security for years are now entitled to the pensions they receive.

Really? It so happens that I have put money into the same bank account for more than 20 years. But if I were to write a check for a million dollars today, it would bounce! The question is not how long you have been putting money in, but how much money you put in.

If what you have been putting into Social Security over the years is enough to pay you a \$1,500 a month pension, but you were promised a \$3,000 a month pension, how much are you entitled to? On what basis?

Social Security was created back in the 1930s, during the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, one of the shrewdest politicians who ever sat in the White House.

President Roosevelt understood that, if you could convince people that they were entitled to a pension under Social Security, it could become politically impossible to ever put an end to that system.

The pensions promised exceeded what could actually be paid from the money that was put in by the recipients. But the first generation to enter Social Security would have their pensions paid by money received from the second generation, as well as its own money. The second generation would be paid with money that included what was paid in by the third generation, and so on.



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This is the principle behind a “pyramid” scheme, in which the first investors can get a big return on their money by simply paying them money received from subsequent investors. But it is only a matter of time before reality catches up with us, since the pyramid scheme is not actually investing any money or saving any money.

That is why a private insurance company that sold annuities based on a pyramid scheme would be prosecuted for fraud, and its officials put in prison. But you can’t put Congress in prison, even when that is what it deserves.

With the money running out in the so-called trust fund for Social Security, reality is beginning to break through the fantasies, and is closing in on us.

No one wants to pull the rug out from under people already retired and dependent on Social Security, or on people nearing retirement age, and expecting a pension that is just not going to be there.

We can be both realistic enough, and decent enough, to rescue older people who have been victimized by political fantasies. We can pay higher taxes temporarily to rescue them. But, there is no reason to bankrupt the country by keeping the fraud going forever.

Younger people can be allowed to opt out and arrange their own pension plans in the private sector, where the kind of irresponsible pyramid schemes that politicians set up are illegal.

But we don’t need to ruin the whole economy, in order to preserve the illusions created by toxic words like “entitlement.”

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