

November 3, 2006

The Honorable Harry Reid
528 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Max Baucus
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Dear Senators Reid and Baucus,

Thank you for your letter of October 31, 2006 and for your congratulations on my nomination as Commissioner of Social Security. I agree wholeheartedly with you that this position is one of the most important in the Federal Government, and I would be honored to serve in that role and to work with you on these important matters.

First, let me assure you that if I am confirmed, my goal as the Commissioner of Social Security will be to build consensus among Republicans and Democrats alike in addressing the many issues confronting this program. The Social Security system and the relevant challenges inherent in it are simply too important to the fabric of our nation to fall victim to partisan politics. For that reason, I was heartened to see that you and the President agree on one key aspect of Social Security—the need to shore up the system's long-term finances. I believe that the President and Congress have done a valuable service to the public by putting the issue of Social Security's impending insolvency on the nation's agenda. In fact, I have been disturbed by certain statements that I have seen by some academics and others suggesting that there is no real problem with the financing of Social Security and that we need do nothing now. For me it is simply not acceptable, in the face of the information we have from the annual Social Security Trustees' reports, to avoid an honest, data-driven debate about how we can best adapt the system so we can make sure that future generations receive the same type of income security that has been available to beneficiaries in the past.


Additionally, while I am certainly aware of the general details of what the President has previously put forth regarding personal accounts, as a nominee, I have not met with or consulted with the technical experts at the agency and elsewhere in government about the specific details of the President's proposal, the critiques of the President's proposal, and the features of competing proposals. It would also be premature for me to seek out assistance from Members of Congress, academic experts and interest groups until the Senate makes a decision on my qualifications, and it would be a bad start to make final conclusions on some very difficult issues until I have had an opportunity to consider those issues fairly. For that reason, I have maintained an open mind about any proposed solutions to address Social Security's impending insolvency, and the relevant criticisms of them. Finally, I would note that I do not know whether the Administration in January will be making significant changes in its Social Security proposals or not.

With regard to my role in the first two years of the term, my understanding is that the Administration is expecting from me substantial continuity with recent practice when it comes to the Commissioner's role. Moreover, I have not been involved in the preparation of the Administration's proposals for the next budget, and expect that those proposals will be submitted to Congress before I could begin work.

I do know the President will be holding me to a high standard of performance on the myriad of operational issues that confront the agency in a time of budget cutbacks and possible furloughs, and I expect that I will be significantly focused on those issues, particularly those related to the agency's expanding obligations under Medicare.

Thank you again for your letter and the opportunity to provide my views about protecting Social Security. Protecting Social Security for the long-term always requires bipartisan cooperation, and should I be confirmed, I look forward to working with both of you in that effort.

Sincerely,



Michael J. Astrue