

Deep in the red

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Better late than never. It took a while, but Americans — or at least some of them — have finally gotten around to talking about the monstrous financial burden that we're leaving our children, our grandchildren and, in all likelihood, our great-grandchildren.

Like Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, who delivered the Republican response to President Obama's address to Congress last month. Addressing the poorly crafted and irresponsible \$787 billion Democratic stimulus bill, Jindal said the legislation would "grow the government, increase our taxes down the line, and saddle future generations with debt." Then Jindal asked the question that every member of Congress should have asked themselves before passing the bill: "Who among us would ask our children for a loan, so we could spend money we do not have, on things we do not need?"

Jindal made exactly the right point. This bill was the equivalent of a jumbo mortgage on future generations, one with a sky-high interest rate. The federal deficit is already estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$1.5 trillion this year, and that will surely grow higher in years to come.

Still, it says something about Americans that it took something as dramatic as a nearly \$1 trillion piece of legislation to spark even the start of a conversation about the bank sheet that we're leaving future generations. In the past, a few brave politicians here and there have talked the need for deficit reduction, but the big spenders in Congress didn't listen.

Even fewer leaders dared to talk about the biggest generational money transfer of them all: Social Security. Originally designed as a safety net for senior citizens, Social Security has become something entirely different: a massive transfer of wealth from young workers to older retirees. One common myth surrounding the program is that those who draw benefits are collecting their own money because everything they've contributed over the years is deposited into a special "lock box" with their name on it.

Not even close. Rather, every generation pays for the one that came before it. And with 69 million baby boomers ready to retire, economists worry about the strain on younger workers who will be hit with higher and higher payroll taxes to make things pencil out. In 1946, the cost of supporting one retiree was shared by 42 workers. But soon, there will be only two workers supporting one retiree. Imagine how heavy the load will be on those workers.

And that was before we put future generations on the hook for paying back the money that Washington is busy printing up to pay for the current economic stimulus package. That will likely mean even higher taxes, and fewer services, for as far as the eye can see.

What a disgraceful example of one generation stealing from those that follow so that it can live more comfortably in the moment. It's no wonder that so few people are eager to talk about it. But we have no choice. We must.

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