

How Do You Say ‘Economic Security’?

By THEODORE R. MARMOR and JERRY L. MASHAW

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IN the face of nothing but bad economic news, Americans often take heart in remembering that we have been here before — during the Great Depression, when conditions were far worse than they are today — and we survived.

But there is a crucial difference between then and now: the words that our political leaders use to talk about our problems have changed. Where politicians once drew on a morally resonant language of people, family and shared social concern, they now deploy the cold technical idiom of budgetary accounting.

This is more than a superficial difference in rhetoric. It threatens to deprive us of the intellectual resources needed to address today’s problems.

Turn back the clock to June 1934. Millions of Americans are out of work, losing their homes and facing more of the same. President Franklin D. Roosevelt responds by creating the Committee on Economic Security. To Congress, he stresses that he places “the security of the men, women and children of the nation first.” All Americans, he emphasizes, “want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated in this man-made world of ours.”

Roosevelt asks the committee to propose “sound means” to secure against “several of the great disturbing factors in life — especially those which relate to unemployment and old age.” Those “sound means” eventually emerge as the programs of Social Security pensions, old-age assistance and unemployment insurance.

Fast forward to February 2010. With millions of Americans out of work, home foreclosures at historic highs and little prospect of relief for those in need, President Obama acts, establishing a National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. The commission’s task is to “improve the fiscal situation,” to “achieve fiscal sustainability over the long run” and to address “the growth of entitlement spending.” The commission recommends, true to its charge, cuts in entitlement spending — that is, the programs established in 1935 and later years to aid the unemployed, aged, disabled and sick.

In August 2011, Congress acts, not to aid those in distress but to cut federal spending. The stated goal of its new “super committee” is to create fiscal balance by recommending measures “to reduce the deficit” by at least \$1.5 trillion over the next decade.

Thus is the desperate situation of many Americans reduced to the clinical language of budgetary accounting. Social insurance programs that protect Americans against the

common hazards of a market economy are “entitlements” that need to be revamped (read: cut) in the name of fiscal balance and deficit reduction.

As an economic policy matter, we view cutting entitlement programs as a very bad idea. But we wish to make a more fundamental observation about language and the collective imagination that language reflects.

In 1934, the focus was on people, family security and the risks to family economic well-being that we all share. Today, the people have disappeared. The conversation is now about the federal budget, not about the real economy in which real people live. If a moral concept plays a role in today’s debates, it is only the stern proselytizing of forcing the government to live within its means. If the effect of government policy on average people is discussed, it is only as providing incentives for the sick to economize on medical costs and for the already strapped worker to save for retirement.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, as the Princeton historian Daniel T. Rodgers demonstrates in his recent book, “The Age of Fracture,” American public discourse was filled with references to the social circumstances of average citizens, our common institutions and our common history. Over the last five decades, that discourse has changed in ways that emphasize individual choice, agency and preferences. The language of sociology and common culture has been replaced by the language of economics and individualism.

In 1934, the government was us. We had shared circumstances, shared risks and shared obligations. Today the government is the other — not an institution for the achievement of our common goals, but an alien presence that stands between us and the realization of individual ambitions. Programs of social insurance have become “entitlements,” a word apparently meant to signify not a collectively provided and cherished basis for family-income security, but a sinister threat to our national well-being.

Over the last 50 years we seem to have lost the words — and with them the ideas — to frame our situation appropriately.

Can we talk about this? Maybe not.

Theodore R. Marmor is a professor emeritus of public policy, and Jerry L. Mashaw is a professor of law, both at Yale. They are co-authors of “America’s Misunderstood Welfare State: Persistent Myths, Enduring Realities.”