

A Letter from the Publisher

For this week's cover story on the nation's troubled Social Security system, TIME's correspondents uncovered almost universal agreement on one point: the initial experience of obtaining a Social Security number can be a real benchmark in life. This finding applied to our own correspondents. "I first got my Social Security card at 16 in Chicago," says Atlanta Bureau Chief Joe Boyce. "Little did I know then that I was entering into a lifelong relationship with federal, state and local bureaucracy." Recalls Senior Correspondent Ruth Mehrtens Galvin: "I well remember when I received my Social Security card. It still bears the name of my employer at the time. And it is one of the few things I have never lost." Says Washington Correspondent Hays Gorey: "It was obtained so long ago I would have to resort to carbon dating to determine when. But I have never forgotten the number." Says Boston Reporter Lisa Towle: "I recall the day my sixth-grade teacher sat the home-room class down and told us it was time to apply for Social Security cards. I felt so proud, though still not understanding the significance."

TIME's correspondents around the country found that the



Saddler with Social Security Chief Svahn

very issue of Social Security quickly touched personal sensitivities of all kinds. "When everybody's standard of living is shrinking," says Reporter-Researcher Denise Worrell, "how can you choose between your own paycheck and your grandfather's Social Security payment?" Says Washington Correspondent Jeanne Saddler, who interviewed top Administration officials, including Commissioner of Social Security John A. Svahn: "Most people have never understood how the system works. The dilemma the Government faces is finding a way to keep the commitments it has made to the people."

Neil MacNeil, who has covered Congress for TIME for 24 years, remembers all too well the way Congressmen used to brag about how they once honored those commitments. But political cynicism aside, TIME's correspondents had all the help they needed to put this important story about human needs and governmental inadequacies in focus. "In nearly every instance," says Los Angeles Reporter Cheryl Crooks, "the issue drew impassioned responses from those interviewed. Some were frightened, many were confused, but no one declined to comment."

John A. Meyers

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Cover: Illustration by Eugene Mihaesco

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