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Statement of Kenneth S. Apfel
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at CBPP/Century Foundation Press Conference
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The staff draft of the Interim Report of the President's Commission to Strengthen Social Security has been released to the public and will be discussed at this week's Commission meeting. I am disappointed by the overall tenor of the draft and disturbed by its biased presentation. I urge the Committee members to rethink their approach before the draft is finalized.

- Today, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Century Foundation are jointly releasing a report written by four noted economists—Alan Blinder, Henry Aaron, Alicia Munnell and Peter Orszag — that takes issue with more than a half dozen key points made in the draft report. I must say that I share the same concerns with the draft report. Not only are there many misleading and inaccurate statements in the draft, but it also provides a biased picture of the need for change.

The draft report purports to represent a "diversity of views" and to provide an "objective analysis" on the challenges facing Social Security. Unfortunately, it fails on both counts. Unless the report is dramatically revised to provide a fairer presentation, it will not help us as a nation to move forward on this critical issue.

Several of today's speakers have highlighted many of the individual issues. I will not repeat these today, but as the former Commissioner of this remarkable program, I must briefly mention three. The first relates to just one of the many examples in which the report uses highly misleading and incomplete data—in this case, the benefits of Social Security received by African Americans. The issue of benefit adequacy for subsets of our population was an issue of personal importance to me during my tenure as Commissioner. Unless the report includes objective facts rather than distortions, it will move us further away from resolution.

The second issue relates to the remarkable conclusions that the Social Security Trust Fund reserves are somehow not real and that today's Social Security surpluses somehow aren't increasing national savings. I strongly disagree with both assertions. Now, we all know that there is enormous debate over national savings and the relative importance of the key solvency dates of 2016 and 2038, but to dismiss the importance of the Trust Funds flies in the face of the

statement in the Report that all views are included and that an objective analysis has been presented.

And lastly, to state that the Social Security system, the crown jewel of American social policy, is somehow unalterably broken is not a view that I share, and not a view that most of the American people share. I don't think there is a single person in our nation who has spent more time than I in recent years talking to the public about Social Security. It is true that there is a growing crisis of confidence, and people know that changes are needed, but people know that the system is not dramatically broken. I take a back seat to no one in my desire to strengthen Social Security and believe that painful changes will be needed on the tax and spending side. And I share the Committee's belief that we need to expand personal savings. But I can assure you there's no consensus for radical change to fix a "broken" system. Alarmist rhetoric gets us no closer to a strengthened social insurance system.

I do not come before you today as a defender of the status quo. I have been criticized by the Left and the Right for my willingness to come together and to compromise for what I view to be the greater good of the American people. My guess is that some of my colleagues speaking at this press event would not be comfortable with some of the changes that I believe we will need to make to strengthen Social Security for the long term. It really will take diverse views coming together to better prepare us for the demographic challenges of the new millennium. This staff report as written will not move us closer together—it will move us further apart.

Earlier this year, I strongly criticized the President's decision to stack a Commission with members that clearly do not represent the spectrum of views on this centrally important issue. I viewed that decision as strike one on moving forward on reform. This staff report—as written—would be strike two. I strongly urge the Committee, chaired by one of the finest persons I know, to go back to the drawing board and rewrite the draft to help us move forward as a people. And get the facts right in the process.