The Promise of Private Pensions

A PENSION RESEARCH COUNCIL BOOK

The Promise *of* Private Pensions

◆ ◆ ◆

The First Hundred Years

Steven A. Sass

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1997

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sass, Steven A., 1949–
The promise of private pensions : the first hundred years / Steven A. Sass.
p. cm.
"A Pension Research Council book"—P. ii.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-94520-4 (alk. paper)
1. Pensions—United States—History. 2. Old age pensions—United States—History. 3. Individual retirement accounts—United States—History. 4. Retirement income—United States—History. 5. Social security—United States—History. I. Title.
HD7125.S27 1997
331.25'2'0973—dc21
96-37847

To Ellen
and our family

Acknowledgments

Every author incurs many debts. But I have a special obligation to Dan McGill, emeritus professor of insurance and risk management and former director of the Pension Research Council at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. This book was Dan's idea; with the support of the Pension Research Council, he engaged me to write a history of the U.S. private pension institution. Dan opened every door at his disposal, and in the world of pensions these doors are many. Because of his introductions, the entire industry cooperated in producing this history. Dan also served as my intellectual mentor and guide. His lectures, writings, and discussions are the foundation of my understanding of private pensions. Without Dan's insights and assistance, I never could have found my way through this complex and subtle *objet d'économique*.

Other members of the Pension Research Council gave generously to this project. Olivia Mitchell, the current director, read the manuscript, provided valuable suggestions, and served as a sage advisor. Other PRC members who read and improved the manuscript include Howard Young, former special consultant to the president of the United Auto Workers, Michael Gordon, legislative aide to Senator Jacob Javits during the battle over ERISA; Robert J. Myers, former chief actuary of the Social Security Administration; and Judith Mazo of the Segal Company. I also wish to thank the Walter Reuther Foundation for its generous financial contribution to the Pension Research Council in support of the publication of this book.

At the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Alicia Munnell and Lynn Browne, directors of research, gave me the time to complete the final chapter, write the epilogue, and revise the manuscript for publication. I thank them for their constant support and encouragement. John Campbell, Jane Katz, and Susan Schacht, colleagues on the staff of the Bank's *Regional Review,* stimulated my thinking and patiently served as sounding boards for my incessant musings on the workings of the pension institution. Joan Poskanzer, editor of the Bank's *New England Economic Review,* gave the entire manuscript a thorough editorial tune-up.

My editors at Harvard University Press – Michael Aronson, Camille Smith, and the Press's two anonymous referees – provided excellent advice in book making. The extended epilogue is one result and the book, I believe, is much better for it. Michael and Camille were an author's dream. Their good humor and sound judgment kept the process upbeat and lively.

Finally, I thank my family. My wife, Ellen Golub, and my children, Fran, Alex, Yoni, and Zoë, for the most part tolerated the time and attention I gave to the project. They also offered insights into the intergenerational and household-economy relationships that underlie a good deal of this history of private pensions. Ellen tolerated the most. She also taught me the most about people, societies, writing, and myself. Ellen has supported me when I needed support, and pushed me when I needed pushing. She has been my companion throughout the endeavor.

Contents

◆ ◆ ◆

The Promise of Private Pensions

Introduction

◆ ◆ ◆

Setting the Problem

> *Pension:* An allowance made to anyone without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.
>
> —Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary,* 1755

The private pension is one of the great curiosities of modern economic history. Why profit-seeking enterprises provide lifetime incomes to retired employees is murky at best. These initiatives in personnel management have, nonetheless, evolved into huge and complex claims on the financial side of the corporate house. Labor unions, the investment industry, and the national government have also staked out important claims on corporate retirement income programs. Private pensions, as a result, have become a composite institution, composed of managerial, business, actuarial, financial, legal, and political subsystems. Though pensions today touch a great many people and social organizations, only a handful of practitioners understand the rationales that drive the various subsystems, and how they interconnect. Most curious of all, the private pension institution has become the largest owner of corporate stock. What began as management's instrument in the market for labor has emerged, via the market for capital, as its nominal master.

The private pension institution is of recent vintage. Prior to 1900, today's vast and complex pensioning apparatus existed in embryo only, and the elderly derived their livelihood from much simpler sources. They worked, drew income from personal investments, relied on their children, and took charity if necessary. Such was the case in all traditional societies. But this pattern rested on a crumbling economic foundation, whose twin footings were handicraft production and the centrality of the family in economic life.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, America was busily erecting a new industrial economy, with bureaucratic and mechanical structures of great intricacy, scale, and organization. Labor and capital were flowing out of the family economy and into these large corporate establishments. Once there, and under the control of rational, systematic management, the household's factors of production became far more fluid, supple, and productive. But detached from the family and traditional skills, labor and capital suffered dangerous new vulnerabilities. The elderly, in particular, found themselves out of step with the new bureaucratic and mechanized regime. The private pension institution emerged as a way for the new corporate employers to address this deficit — and needs of their own — in a rational, systematic fashion.

The task turned out to be far larger and more resistant to system than the employers had imagined. They were forced to engage outside businesses and specialists to service their plans, including the largest insurance carriers and trust companies and the most sophisticated actuaries, lawyers, and investment managers. The government and the labor unions also demanded, and won, a powerful voice in these employer pension programs. So the institution became a Byzantine mosaic, the product of shifting corporate strategies, union campaigns, congressional mandates, judicial and administrative decisions, and the manipulations of actuarial, insurance, legal, and investment firms.

The institution is also an accretion. Pension plans are carefully counterbalanced sets of commitments, stretching far into the future, running between the employer, perhaps thousands of workers, their unions, the government, and outside investment vehicles. These complex arrangements are continually fought over and adjusted. But because of these carefully counterbalanced commitments, a plan of a particular vintage will persist for decades after the conditions that produced it no longer exist.

The pension institution is today a financial leviathan. A third of the private workforce participates in a private pension plan at any one time. Perhaps two-thirds will accrue a benefit over the course of their working careers. The institution is perhaps the largest beneficiary of federal tax incentives and absorbs more corporate revenue than any other employee "fringe" benefit, with the possible exception of health insurance. Private pension funds, as a result, in 1993 held about $1.5 trillion in assets. Pension liabilities — the present value of future benefit payments — are perhaps even greater.[1]

The institution reached its high-water mark with the passage of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, the nation's most ambitious attempt to bring order to its private pension system. ERISA strengthened the institution's commitments and extended its reach. But soon after enactment the nation's larger economic system itself began shifting. The pension had been the creature of big business, big labor, and big government. In the years since 1974 the power of each has declined.

The nation's households still need a retirement income system. They still transfer their labor and capital to corporate engines of production, their members are retiring earlier, and they are living much longer. How profit-seeking enterprises respond to these changes, and to what degree their response is a pensioning system at all, is yet to be seen.