Since the end of the cold war, entitlement programs have been the largest component of government spending. We are now entitled through a wide variety of programs to medical care, education, housing, food, and numerous other things, all of which amount to a guaranteed income even if we don’t call it by that name.

We should recognize that as Americans we have always had entitlements. Our first constitutional document, the Declaration of Independence, asserts that as Americans we are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Any entitlement must involve a corresponding obligation or duty. It is impossible for one person to have an entitlement without someone else having a duty.

The Declaration's entitlement to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness allows each of us to use our talents and our property however we choose, while at the same time it obligates each of us to forbear from violating the equal entitlements of our fellows. What should be noted about this obligation is that it is negative and not positive. We are obligated to avoid interfering with the equal rights of others, but we are not obligated to perform positive acts for their benefit. For instance, we would be entitled to use our talents and whatever capital we could raise to open and operate a school. We could properly expect other people to forbear from interfering with our right to do so. At the same time, we would be obligated not to violate other people's equal entitlements. We could not forcibly prevent other people also from opening schools. Nor could we force them to attend our school or to contribute to its financial support.

Nowhere in the Declaration’s formulation does one person's entitlement entail the performance of a positive duty by someone else. Herbert Hoover’s call for “a chicken in
“every pot” represents a very different form of entitlement. One person can be guaranteed a chicken only if someone else is obligated to provide it. This form of entitlement entails the imposition of a positive duty. This duty could take the direct form of being compelled to provide chickens for other people. But more realistically it would take the indirect form of being taxed to finance the purchase of chickens that subsequently are given to those other people. The outcome is the same in either case, with one person’s entitlement imposing positive duties on other people.

To be sure, a chicken in every pot is a quite small entitlement program. But most entitlement programs start small. The history of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is an excellent illustration. It began as a small program to aid widows with orphaned children. At the time it was abolished during welfare reform a few years ago, it was a large program that served mostly unmarried, teenaged mothers.

Our public discourse emphasizes the entitlement over the duty. This surely gives an unbalanced tone to public perceptions of the issues. To frame a question in terms of how much income people should be guaranteed places the focus on competing notions of what constitutes an adequate income or standard of living. Some people might have a more expansive notion of adequacy than others, and the democratic process will yield some kind of compromise outcome in this respect.

The issue could just as easily have been framed in terms of duties. A guaranteed income is equivalent to a program of forced labor to make good on those guarantees. A public debate could well take place over how much forced labor should be imposed in the land of the free. To frame the issue in this manner would surely shift the terms of public discourse.
Entitlement programs are commonly characterized as forming a "safety net." This term certainly cultivates a pleasant image. Among people who are trying to climb high to the best of their talents, some may fall through no fault of their own. If they do, the safety net breaks their falls and sends them on their ways again.

There is no doubt that people try in many ways to protect themselves against disruptive or calamitous events. The development of insurance is good testimony to the energy and creativity that people have brought to the search for such protection. Through insurance people can cover themselves against a variety of catastrophes ranging from accident or illness through the destruction of property. People can also create safety nets through saving, which can support them against unemployment and provide annuities for retirement. To be sure, a safety net is not created through individual effort alone. Everyone is born into a family, and families are valuable sources of support and instruction. So too are churches and a variety of associations and organizations that people create to deal with their needs for mutual support. In any case, people will craft safety nets on their own without government.

In this respect, contemporary debates over social security are not just debates about post-retirement standards of living. They also concern the extent to which we will be governed by principles of liberty or by principles of servility. Our present approach to social security is grounded in servility. A genuine system of individual accounts would be grounded in liberty.