

Social Security

by [Myles Weber](#) (April 2023)



Sleeping by the Lion Carpet, Lucian Freud, 1996

I have a plan to save the retirement funds:
fat acceptance.

Like smokers, overeaters die
not at their peak but slightly post-prime
as they near the end of careers.
Contributing a chunk of their salaries
each pay period,
unhealthy citizens expire before the payout,
leaving the principal to us.

Whichever tactic we settle on,
you and I must solve this problem ourselves
since, like Oedipus, we have cursed the polis.
No foreign agents forced us to murder good sense
and cower before our loudest colleagues.
Europeans may have planted the seed
with their sly, unreadable books,
but the scowling mob who champion untruth
arise from the domestic realm.
It is they we capitulate to,
not Muhammad, not Marx, not the Frankfurt School.
We sold ourselves a bill of goods
and paid top dollar,
for who needs honor
when indulgences can be purchased,
consequences delayed?

Like doomed families, dying empires
simmer in a stew
equal parts wealth and self-deception.
Too secure to fail, great civilizations
cultivate fragility
and topple just the same.

Abetting the slide is the intimidation factor.
I agree with you, one undergraduate tells me,
but I could never cop to that in class.

Child, please—stand your ground.

All I'd said was some areas of study
benefit humanity more than others,
our own field being a conspicuous laggard.

Those more useless than ours
deserve special ridicule, I'd maintained.
That is spicy stuff, the timid boy assures me.
He's been told so
by an especially fetching female classmate.

But there's hope. Let's not forget
how one of the leading lights of France,
his intelligence beyond measure,
died from the plague while dismissing
the sexually transmitted virus as a cultural construct.
He damaged the Enlightenment project and infected others,
but his dishonesty took him out in middle age.
The pension fund in Paris benefited.

As long as the most vocal advocates of devilry
and their minions stick to their guns, there's hope.
The brick wall of medical reality yields to no one.

Not everyone encouraged to
will choose to overeat
but other maladies threaten.
Each lost soul is doomed by mendacity
if karma catches men with no integrity.
(I'm not so sure.)

When enough are felled
by gluttony, addiction, or lust,
solvency may intervene.

The payoff to seeing the walking wounded expire
is fungible and exceeds mere schadenfreude.

What keeps the braying mob
on track toward decline?
The thrill of observing
the gaudy pyrotechnics of mass destruction?
Mere self-loathing? Not entirely,
as there are immediate benefits
to deceit—even friends of a sort, you could say.
Intellectual crime pays handsomely.

Still, after witnessing older comrades suffer,
might the brightest among the goon squad members
redirect themselves on a path illuminated by the truth?
For now, they're rats
clamoring onto a sinking ship,
having first chewed a hole through the hull
with a promise of sufficient resources to buoy them.
Will it be reward enough
to witness the collapse of all we've built,
at the cost of solvency, of life itself?
Did the recollection of his orgasms comfort Michel Foucault
as he lay on his hospital bed
when he might have saved himself and others
with self-reflection and a box of condoms?

Either way, we win.

Option One: The mob members barrel ahead
until they suffer and die. (More for us.)

Option Two: They end their flirtation
with auto-annihilation and preserve institutions
through virtuous traits—duty, intelligence, thrift—
all the while innovating at something beneficial
and contributing more profitably to the public coffer.
If the worst filled with passionate intensity
are playacting because they believe for now
a payout is guaranteed,
perhaps we're not exhausted after all.
Perverse, but not exhausted after all.

[Table of Contents](#)

Myles Weber is a professor of English at Winona State University in Minnesota. His work has appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, the *Southern Review*, the *Georgia Review*, the *Sewanee Review*, and many other journals. He is the author of *Consuming Silences: How We Read Authors Who Don't Publish* (U of Georgia Press).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)