Tom Matzzie
Washington Director

Brooks Jackson
Director, Annenberg Political Fact Check
Annenberg Public Policy Center
320 National Press Building
Washington DC 20045

Dear Mr. Jackson:

We strongly object to your claim that MoveOn.org was inaccurate in saying that President Bush's privatization plan would cut Social Security benefits. Social Security was designed to provide a retirement benefit that bears some relationship to workers' wage income during their working career. As wages rise, Social Security benefits have always risen along with them. This was done informally prior to 1974 (Congress raised benefit levels every few years) and has been done with formal wage indexation since 1974.

President Bush's plan cuts benefits compared to what workers would receive under current law. This implies very substantial reductions over time. In our ad, we mentioned the 46% cut in benefits that retirees would suffer at the end of the Social Security Trustees' projection period. To take another example, according to the Trustees projections, workers retiring forty years after the Bush plan is put in place would see a benefit cut of 36 percent compared to currently scheduled levels. Using the Congressional Budget Office projections, the Bush plan implies cuts of 41 percent for such a worker.

In referring to a cut against scheduled benefit levels, MoveOn was using the standard framing for the whole debate. There would be no Social Security shortfall whatsoever, if the goal was simply to provide the current benefit level. President Bush and proponents of privatization have consistently used the scheduled benefit as their benchmark when they have warned of benefit cuts, if no changes are made. This statement is not true if a benefit cut means a cut against current benefit levels - it only could be true if they are referring to scheduled future benefits. In this sense, MoveOn.org has referred to benefit "cuts" in exactly the same way as the president. If Fact Check only considers a cut as a reduction against current benefit levels, then it should correct the president and other proponents of privatization who routinely warn of benefit cuts.

In fact, this is the same way that Fact Check itself has referred to benefit cuts. Towards the end of its release criticizing our ad, the release asserts:

"Furthermore, current law will force an actual cut in benefits eventually, under official projections. The Social Security trustees estimate that under current law, without a tax increase, all benefits would have to be cut 27% when the Social Security Trust Fund is exhausted in the year 2042, and would continue to be cut each year thereafter. The

Congressional Budget Office has a more optimistic projection, predicting that the trust fund wouldn't be exhausted until 2052--ten years later--and that benefits would have to be cut only 22% at first."

Since the longstanding debate on Social Security has proceeded from the standpoint that not paying currently scheduled benefits is a "cut," and that is the framing that both sides in the debate have adopted, and FactCheck itself finds it difficult to avoid this framing, I suggest that you adopt the standard framing. At the very least, you should not accuse an organization that uses the standard framing of being misleading or inaccurate.

Sincerely,

Tom Matzzie
Washington Director
MoveOn.org