What could possibly go wrong? DOGE to rapidly rebuild Social Security codebase.

Like many legacy government IT systems, SSA systems contain code written in COBOL, a programming language created in part in the 1950s by computing pioneer Grace Hopper. The Defense Department essentially pressured private industry to use COBOL soon after its creation, spurring widespread adoption and making it one of the most widely used languages for mainframes, or computer systems that process and store large amounts of data quickly, by the 1970s. (At least one DOD-related website praising Hopper's accomplishments is no longer active, likely following the Trump administration's DEI purge of military acknowledgements.)

As recently as 2016, SSA's infrastructure contained more than 60 million lines of code written in COBOL, with millions more written in other legacy coding languages, the agency's Office of the Inspector General found. In fact, SSA's core programmatic systems and architecture haven't been "substantially" updated since the 1980s when the agency developed its own database system called MADAM, or the Master Data Access Method, which was written in COBOL and Assembler, according to SSA's 2017 modernization plan.

SSA's core "logic" is also written largely in COBOL. This is the code that issues social security numbers, manages payments, and even calculates the total amount beneficiaries should receive for different services, a former senior SSA technologist who worked in the office of the chief information officer says. Even minor changes could result in cascading

failures across programs.

“If you weren’t worried about a whole bunch of people not getting benefits or getting the wrong benefits, or getting the wrong entitlements, or having to wait ages, then sure go ahead,” says Dan Hon, principal of Very Little Gravitas, a technology strategy consultancy that helps government modernize services, about completing such a migration in a short timeframe.

It’s unclear when exactly the code migration would start. A recent document circulated amongst SSA staff laying out the agency’s priorities through May does not mention it, instead naming other priorities like terminating “non-essential contracts” and adopting artificial intelligence to “augment” administrative and technical writing.

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