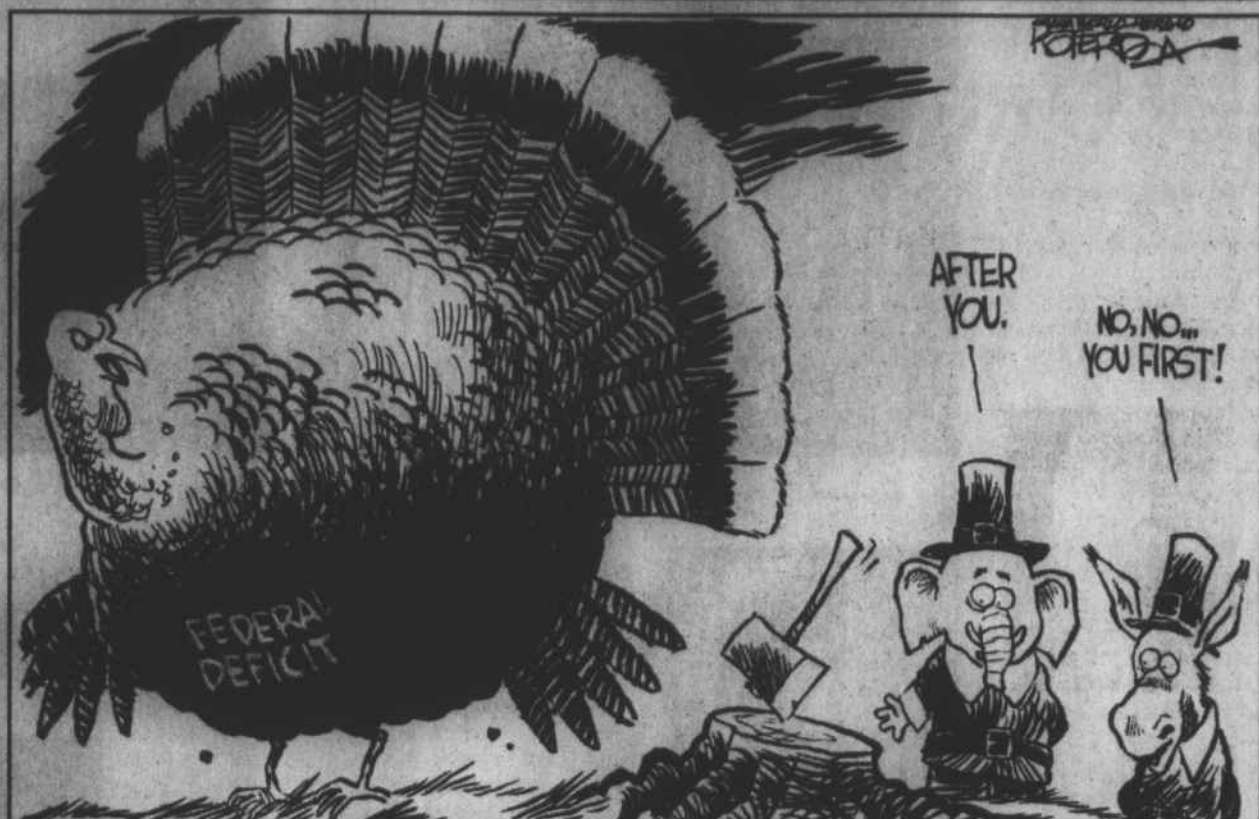
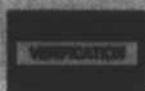


OPINION/ FORUM

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Income Inequality Grows



George Curry
 Guest Columnist

The threat of an impending fiscal cliff has sparked intense conversations about whether upper income citizens are paying their fair share of taxes. But equally important – and perhaps more important in the long term – is the issue of income inequality.

A new report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Economic Policy Institute, two Washington-based think tanks, documents the growing gap between rich and poor as well as the rich and middle-class families. That pattern holds true both nationally and at the state level.

The report, titled, "Pulling Apart: A State-by-State Analysis of Income Trends," found: "Over the past three business cycles prior to 2007, the incomes of the country's highest-income households climbed substantially, while middle- and lower-income households saw only modest increases.

"During the recession of 2007 through 2009, households at all income levels, including the wealthiest, saw declines in real income due to widespread job losses and the loss of realized capital gains. But the incomes of the richest households have begun to grow again while the incomes of those at the bottom and middle continue to stagnate and wide gaps remain between high-income households and poor and middle-income households saw only modest increases."

The poorest fifth of households in the U.S. had an average income of \$20,510. The top fifth had eight times as much – \$164,490.

"On average incomes fell by close to 6 percent among the bottom fifth of households between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, while rising 8.6 percent among the top fifth," the report found. "Incomes grew even faster – 14 percent – among the top 5 percent of households.

A similar gap existed between top earners and middle-class households.

"On average, incomes grew by just 1.2 percent among the middle fifth of households between the late 1990s and the mid-

2000s, well below the 8.6 percent gain among the top fifth," the report stated. "Income disparities between the top and middle fifths increased significantly in 36 states and declined significantly in only one state (New Hampshire.)"

The report contains charts that show how income equality plays out at the state level.

The state with the largest household income gap was New Mexico, where the bottom fifth averaged \$16,319 annually and the top fifth of households earned \$161,162, a top-to-bottom ratio of 9.9. New Mexico was followed, in order, by Arizona, California, Georgia, New York, Louisiana, Texas, Massachusetts, Illinois and Mississippi.

New Mexico also had the greatest gap between the middle fifth of households (\$51,136) and top fifth (\$161,162), a ratio of 3.2. New Mexico was followed, in order, by California, Georgia, Mississippi, Arizona, New York, Texas, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Louisiana.

Those gaps were even larger when poor and middle-class households were compared with the top 5 percent of all earners. For example, the income of the

top 5 percent of households was 13.3 times the average income of the bottom fifth. The ratio was more than 15 times that in Arizona, New Mexico, California, Georgia and New York.

According to the report, the major reason for the growing economic disparity has been the stagnant wages for workers in the low and middle-income brackets while wages of the highest paid employees have grown significantly.

Authors of the report made the following recommendations for narrowing the inequality gap: raise and index the minimum wage; improve and extend unemployment insurance; make state tax systems more progressive by weighing the impact of sales tax and user fees on low-income families; and strengthening the safety net.

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of *Emerge* magazine, is editor-in-chief of the *National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service (NNPA)*. He is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. Curry can be reached through his Website www.georgecurry.com.



Judge Roland Hayes has had a decades-long legal career in Winston-Salem.

Judge Hayes one of the best around

Having read not so long ago the embarrassing or attempted embarrassing piece about our beloved Judge Roland Hayes, we thought we would go and observe the proceedings in some other courtrooms. Needless to say, what we found was not only depressing, but disgusting as well.

Instead of some would-be self-appointed critic trying to make a joke out of the exemplary work that Judge Hayes has been doing for three decades, he should have been criticizing some real issues in our courts today.

Case in point: the courtroom we visited for three-quarters of the day was packed; standing room only. Ninety-five percent of the defendants were young African Americans and Latinos. There may have been two defendant Caucasians. In addition to that 98 percent of the defense lawyers were white, all the court clerks were white, all of the prosecutors were white, the police officers were white and the judge was white.

Perhaps that shouldn't matter but it does. Indigent minority defendants are treated like cattle being driven to the slaughter house. If some so-called critic wants to criticize something let them criticize that. Let them point those inequities out and offer some solutions that will give those defendants a shot at getting some compassion and understanding of their plight.

The prosecutors and the judge didn't care that a minority defendant couldn't make restitution because he was caring for four little girls and couldn't work even if he could find a job, which he couldn't. Bringing defendants to court in handcuffs and leg irons is a depressing sight. How can anyone be innocent looking like that? Yet, our would-be critic chooses to make fun at one of the few African American judges who shows some empathy and compassion to people coming into his court. Disgusting!

Judges are so important in our society and we are hoping and praying that the organization that supported our president will stay organized and get more minorities elected locally, particularly judges. We should also demand to have more minority court clerks and police officers too.

Sometimes it appears to us that people think the fight is over. Trust us folks...it ain't!

The Scam that Stole Thanksgiving



Julianne Malveaux
 Guest Columnist

When I think of Thanksgiving Day, I think of family, gathered around a table with turkey and dressing, green beans and candied yams, mac and cheese or whipped potatoes, and lots of other goodies. I look forward to seeing folks I haven't seen in a while, savoring the food and fellowship and bringing in the late evening over coffee and pie. Nobody is rushing out to go shopping – most people save that for the Friday after Thanksgiving, often called Black Friday, because many stores find themselves in the black after the profligate shopping that day.

There have been tragedies associated with Black Friday. A few years back, a Walmart employee was trampled to death by a crowd way too eager to get to the consumer goods. There have also been altercations, bruises and cuts as customers have vied for some of the scarce goods available or for crazy deals (often only for the first 200 people). Lines often snake around stores as people wait for a chance for a bargain.



Now Walmart has upped the ante. Last year, they opened at 10 p.m. and this year they will open at 8 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day. Just when folks settle down from their meal and start swapping lies, someone is going to have to get up and rush to work so they can serve those consumers who want to shop on Thanksgiving Day.

Many of those who will work do so out of desperation. Many Walmart employees don't have a full 40-hour shift; some find their hours adjusted each week. Thanksgiving work will augment scarce incomes. Just this week, I talked with a couple whose joint income at Walmart is \$26,000 a year, partly because neither has a full week's schedule.

There are those who ask, "Well, why do they work there?" as if there are easy alternatives. But Walmart is one of our nation's largest employers, and they often set the tone for similar stores such as Best Buy, Sears and others. With Walmart opening at 8 p.m. on Thanksgiving, their competitors will follow because they don't want to lose momentum to

Walmart.

This is why some Walmart employees are protesting the way that Walmart treats its employees. They want to inform the public of illegal actions that Walmart has taken against its employees, and have initiated a series of protests, including strikes, rallies, an online campaign, and other actions. Their organization, Making Change at Walmart, says that Walmart can help revive our economy if they will simply offer workers full-week schedules and fair pay.

When Walmart employees speak out, there is retaliation. They are fired, or their hours are cut back. They very swiftly get the message that speaking out will be punished. Too many silently seethe at unfair policies; too dependent on the little pay they get to raise their voices.

This is why the Making Change at Walmart campaign is so important. It challenges the notion that economic growth is dependent on the exploitation of workers, and suggests, instead, that paying people a living wage is a way to grow a stable and

secure workforce.

Walmart is not the only company that prefers to pay its workers on a part-time basis. Many fast-food operations do the same thing, varying hours each week so that workers have no way of knowing when they will work. This means they have difficulty arranging for childcare with these variable hours. Of course, this does not concern their employers. They are more interested in their bottom line, profits.

Many who are aware of the labor exploitation at Walmart say that their prices and deals are unbeatable, and with their money tight they have no choice but to seek the best bargains they can find. Yet the price of the great deals is exploitation of another worker.

The action to inform Walmart customers about Walmart's unfair pay and illegal actions allows people who shop on Thanksgiving Day and on other days to make informed decisions about their shopping. One of the ways consumers can make a statement is to stay home on Thanksgiving Day, enjoying family, giving thanks, and postponing shopping.

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 Idea?
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