

VIEWPOINTS

What about Social Security reform?

The battle over Social Security has begun.

President Bush wants to make the biggest changes to Social Security since its inception by allowing workers to direct some of their contributions to private accounts. Others propose alternative Social Security changes; still others want no changes at all.

There are many questions about Social Security's status and the ideas for changing this important program. I'll try to answer some of the key ones as completely and evenly as possible, and then let you decide about the program's future.

Is social security going broke? The key factor determining Social Security's financial future is economic growth. The faster the economy grows, the longer Social Security will survive. Faster economic growth means more income per worker and more contributions to the Social Security system.

In fact, if the economy grows at the average rate it has in the last decade, Social Security could easily last until the end of the century.

Conversely, if the economy grows more slowly, Social Security could very well face a problem by mid-century. But the bottom line is, the economy is the key.

Are Social Security's savings worthless? Social Security has accumulated \$1.3 trillion in savings for future retirement payments. By law, the savings are invested in U.S. government securities. Some say these government IOUs are worthless, meaning Social Security's "savings" are a mirage.

If this is true, then many investors are also in trouble because U.S. gov-

YOU DECIDE

Dr. Mike Walden
N.C. Cooperative Extension

ernment securities are one of the most common and safest investments around. The U.S. government has never missed an interest payment or redemption on these investments. It would take a major financial collapse of the federal government for Social Security's IOUs not to be cashed in. I don't see this happening, but others aren't so sure.

Would private accounts solve social security's problems? Privatized Social Security accounts would operate like 401K plans. The pensions produced by the accounts would depend on how much money workers invested and what investment returns were earned on the money.

The current investment returns on Social Security funds are low — between 2 and 3 percent — because the system invests only in low-risk government securities. So for a worker to do better with private accounts, the worker will have to invest in funds giving a higher return, which usually implies some degree of higher risk. There's no free lunch!

What other options are being considered? One option being pushed is to increase the ceiling of income subject to the Social Security tax. Currently any worker earnings over \$90,000 are not liable to the tax.

Some say this is a free ride for the rich, and therefore the ceiling should be eliminated. However, the taxation ceiling exists due to a com-

parable ceiling on Social Security pensions. Social Security pensions received at retirement generally are higher for persons who earned more when working.

But this increase in the retirement pension stops at a certain income level, which is the same as the ceiling on earnings subject to the tax.

So any increase in the income ceiling on Social Security taxes without a comparable increase of the ceiling for pension payments would simply mean higher-income workers would pay more without receiving any additional benefit. Some call this unfair; others don't!

A second idea is to alter how earnings are increased and used as the base for Social Security pensions. Currently, a worker's initial Social Security pension is established by adjusting his or her average career earnings by the growth in wages over the work career. One proposal is to use growth in prices for the adjustment instead.

This matters because wages typically increase faster than prices. So changing to "price indexing" for a worker's initial pension would make that pension smaller and save the Social Security system over \$1 trillion in coming decades.

There are many more issues surrounding Social Security reform. The program affects virtually all of us, so it's crucial you decide where to stand.

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Let's welcome the controversy once again

"This one is not going to be controversial like the others."

My friend was talking about the new selection for UNC-Chapel Hill's next summer reading program, "Blood Done Sign My Name," by Tim Tyson.

As a part of the program, the university asks all of its incoming students to read the same book during the summer before classes begin. Then during orientation, the students, led by faculty and staff, discuss the book and the issues it raises. It gives the students one of the few "common" intellectual experiences a big university can offer these days. Sadly, the program is now "voluntary," which means that a lot of new students, busy moving in and getting settled, opt out of participation.

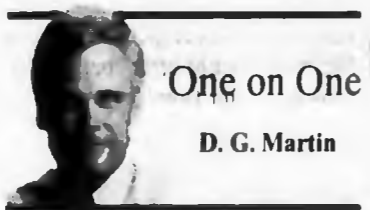
One of the reasons for the "voluntariness" was the uproar that the selection three years ago caused. The selection of "Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations" by Michael Sells, brought criticism from some politicians and religious leaders. They said it was improper for a public university to be teaching (or promoting) a particular religion in this case Islam. One group even filed a lawsuit to try to stop the on-campus discussions of that book.

Year before last, Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" also drew some complaints. Most were based on the author's "far left" political views.

Last year, the selection was a "non-controversial" book about student life at West Point. "Absolutely American" by David Lipsky gave the campus a reprieve from unfriendly criticism and scrutiny.

Now, what about "Blood Done Sign My Name"? Will the campus again escape unwellcome controversy about its summer reading choice?

Maybe not. At first brush Tim Tyson's book is simply a careful and sensitive retelling of Oxford, a small North Carolina town, and its encounters with some of the worst events of the struggle for civil rights in the 1960's and early 1970's. The story tells how the town and its people dealt with a brutal ra-



One on One
D. G. Martin

cial killing and the downtown burnings that were a part of the accompanying racial unrest.

If this year were 1960 or 1970 on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, this kind of book would bring down a torrent of controversy that would make the stirrings about "Approaching the Qur'an" seem like a Quaker meeting in comparison.

Back then, some of us were still blaming all our racial unrest on outside agitators and the Communists.

But it is 2005. Now everybody is "pro-civil rights and equal rights." The children and grandchildren of people who fought for continued segregation and white dominance now fill the Smith Center to give adoring cheers to the black students who bring their team victories.

So today, it is as hard to find anyone who will admit fighting for segregation as it is to find some one who will admit voting for Nixon and Agnew.

Even when Tyson's book opens with the forbidden, inflammatory words, "Daddy and Roger and 'em shot 'em a nigger" we read on, identifying with the victim — and rejecting any connection with anyone who would use "that term."

Since almost all of us take the pro-civil rights side as far as the civil rights struggle is concerned, even telling the dark side of our region's history may not provoke controversy. People who might otherwise object to the book will probably keep quiet, knowing that they might be labeled "racists" if they speak up.

But wait a minute. I think the author, Tim Tyson, will be disappointed if the conversations this summer don't have sparks flying. He wants us to confront our past and deal with what it has made us.

He says, "We are runaway slaves from our own past, and only by turn-

ing to face the hounds can we find our freedom beyond them."

One part of that past has to do with the violence and burnings organized by young black men in Oxford. When we celebrate the achievements of the civil rights movement, we honor the marches, the sit-ins, and the non-violent resistance that brought about change.

Tyson challenges our thinking. The story he tells shows, whether we like it or not, that it was violent, as much or more as non-violent, activity that led to changes in Oxford.

This part of our history is going to be hard for some of us to confront, especially at a time when we are committed to a war on terrorism and terrorists, however good the terrorists' long-term objectives may seem to them.

No controversy this year? I hope we will have plenty of it. It will honor an important book by a brave author who has no fear of controversy about who we were — and what our history has made us.

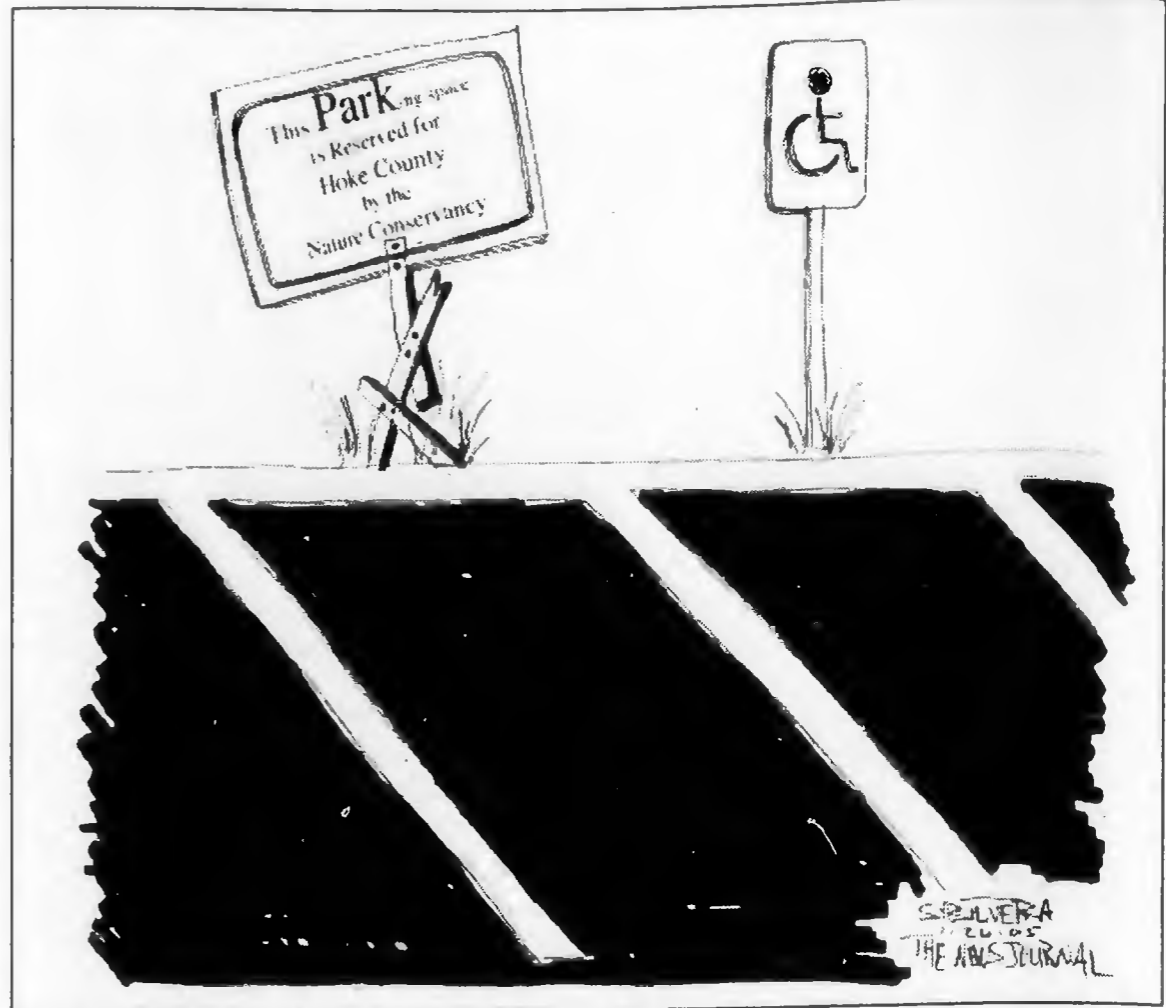
D.G. Martin is the author of "Interstate Eateries: a handbook of home cooking places near North Carolina's interstate highways available through Our State Magazine (800-948-1409 or www.ourstate.com). He is the host of UNC-TV's North Carolina Bookwatch, which airs on Sundays at 5:00 p.m. This week's (January 30) guest is Bart Ehrman, author of "Lost Christianities."

Letters policy

The News-Journal welcomes letters to the editor and encourages readers to express their opinions.

Letters must be signed and include an address and phone number. The street address and phone number will not be published, but are required so we may verify authenticity. The name of the writer and, in some cases, the town the writer is from will be published at the end of the letter.

We reserve the right to edit letters for grammar, as well as those that exceed 300 words. We will not publish letters that we consider to be in poor taste or libelous. In some cases we may add an editor's note as a postscript when we believe a correction, explanation or amplification is warranted. We may also, at our discretion, limit the number of times an individual writer may submit a letter for publication.



Peach profits up in smoke in January

In a previous article I explained that January is a month in which I go completely broke. With birthdays and a wedding anniversary, I used all the money from peach sales I made during the summer. My birthday was a real treat, people called me who I haven't heard from in years. The only conclusion I can draw is that they reasoned, "I had better call him now, because next year he may not be around." A pleasant thought, although I am going to fool them; as long as there is a peach around I am going to stick around.

Here is a great recipe for a happy marriage. It is called the 10 Commandments of Marriage.

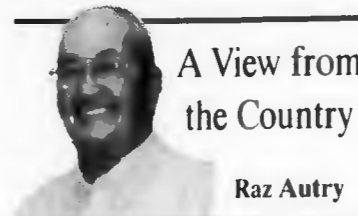
Command 1 — Marriages are made in Heaven. But then so are thunder and lightning.

Command 2 — If you want your spouse to listen and pay strict attention to every word you say, talk in your sleep.

Command 3 — Marriage is grand and divorce is at least a 100 grand.

Command 4 — Married life is very frustrating. In the first year of marriage the man speaks and the woman listens. In the second year the woman speaks and the man listens. In the third year they both speak and the neighbors listen.

Command 5 — When a man opens the door of his car for his wife, you can be sure of one thing. Either the car is new or the wife is.



A View from the Country
Raz Autry

Command 6 — Marriage is when a man and woman become as one, the trouble starts when they try to decide which one.

Command 7 — Before marriage, a man will lie awake all night thinking about something you said. After marriage, he will fall asleep before you finish talking.

Command 8 — Every man wants a wife who is beautiful, understanding, economical, and a good cook. But the law allows only one wife.

Command 9 — Every woman wants a man who is handsome, understanding, economical and a considerate lover, but again the law allows only one husband.

Command 10 — Man is incomplete until he marries. After that, he is finished.

Command 11 (which is not supposed to be) — Never agree to take over any chore you have assumed was a wife's duty. If so, you will never be able to return it.

The weather is the main topic of conversation these days. People complain it is fickle. True, but we had the same type of weather in the 40's and

50's. Mother Nature repeats herself. There's always a lot to be thankful for, if you take the time to look for it. For example, I am sitting here doing this typing thinking how nice it is that wrinkles don't hurt.

I leave you with these thoughts, not original but from a friend of many years. This story is called "God's Boxes."

"I have in my hand two boxes which God gave me to hold."

He said, "Put all your sorrows in the black box, and all your joys in the gold."

I heeded His words, and in the two boxes, both my joys and sorrows I stored. But though the gold became heavier each day, the black was as light as before.

With curiosity, I opened the black box. I wanted to find out why, and I saw, in the base of the box, a hole, which my sorrows had fallen out by.

I showed the hole to God, and mused, "I wonder where my sorrows could be."

He smiled a gentle smile and said, "My child, they're all here with me." I asked God why He gave me the boxes. Why the gold and the black with the hole?

"My child, the gold is for you to count your blessings; the black is for you to let go."

A ball is a circle, no beginning, no end. It keeps us together like our Circle of Friends. But the treasure inside for you to see, is the treasure of friendship you've granted to me.

We Get Letters

'Grand Ma K was the best person in our family'

To the Editor:

I apologize for not writing sooner to thank you, The News-Journal and Krisan Murphy of the Second Day Writers for the wonderful tribute to my late wife, KC O'Connor, in the December 22, 2004 News-Journal.

K often asked me if I thought anyone read her articles (KC wrote a column called "Writer's Block") and if they liked them. She would "light up" when people we knew would tell her how much they enjoyed them. Our immediate and extended family, especially our grandchildren, were the source of much of her writings.

When first diagnosed with lung cancer, she told the emergency room doctor at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center, "Well, you have to fix me. I can't die. I have seven grandchildren."

All of our grandchildren were treated to stories that she made up just for them. In return, they would often have to make up stories for her. They all knew that Grandma K would always have a snack, a good story and an art lesson when they came to visit or she visited them.

K loved being with people and thoroughly enjoyed life. She fought her battle with cancer without complaining even when I knew she was in extreme pain. If you even implied she would not recover, she would tell you "You're being negative" and would ignore you.

I always knew she was a talented and special lady, but she only pursued her talents after our children were on their own.

Most people know her for her art and writing but her greatest accomplishment was preparing our children for life. No parents could be prouder than we were. The many pieces of art displayed in our home (and some outside on the fence) and her writings are

treasured reminders of what a wonderful person she was.

Our 6-year-old grandson Hunter recently told me rather matter of fact — "Grand Ma K was the best person in our family. Why was that?"

Thank you from the O'Connor, Splawn, Leon and Bracey families for the opportunity you gave her to share her talent with your readers.

Sincerely,
Jim O'Connor

The News-Journal

Published every Wednesday by
Dickson Press, Inc.
Paul Dickson, Chairman
Robert A. Dickson, President
Anne Dickson Fogleman, Secretary/Treasurer
119 W. Elwood Avenue, Raeford, NC 28376
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Worth Repeating

"You are the greatest award. God has let me bring every one of my soldiers back home." — First Sgt. Larry Everett of HHC, 105th Engi-

neer Battalion at a welcome home and awards ceremony for the N.C. National Guard unit after its return from a tour of duty in Iraq.