



Other Viewpoints

Burden of loans affects college plans

A Pew Research Center study has found that 19 percent of U.S. households are now carrying student debt, roughly twice as many as were doing so a little more than two decades ago when the parents of today's students were in school. Just since 2007, the number of families with higher education-related debt has climbed by 15 percent.

The drivers of this debt phenomenon are both diverse and obvious. For starters, a year at a typical state university such as K-State costs more than \$4,000 counting just tuition and fees. The median household income in Riley County in 2010 was around \$39,000, meaning that about half of all local families who want to avoid college debt would essentially have to tithe to that college, and would have to do so before they paid any local, state or federal taxes.

The pattern of reductions in state commitment to higher education shows no sign of reversing and has prompted universities to shift the financial burden onto students. That combined with the largely stagnant economy only further drives the debt burden.

In recent days, those involved in job creation have tried to make the argument that spending on higher education facilitates economic growth. To whatever extent that is true – and we're not taking issue with it – the shift away from state responsibility is substantially a political reality, and is unlikely to be reversed any time soon.

The logical recourse for those facing increasing debt, including student debt, is eventually to pull back from spending.

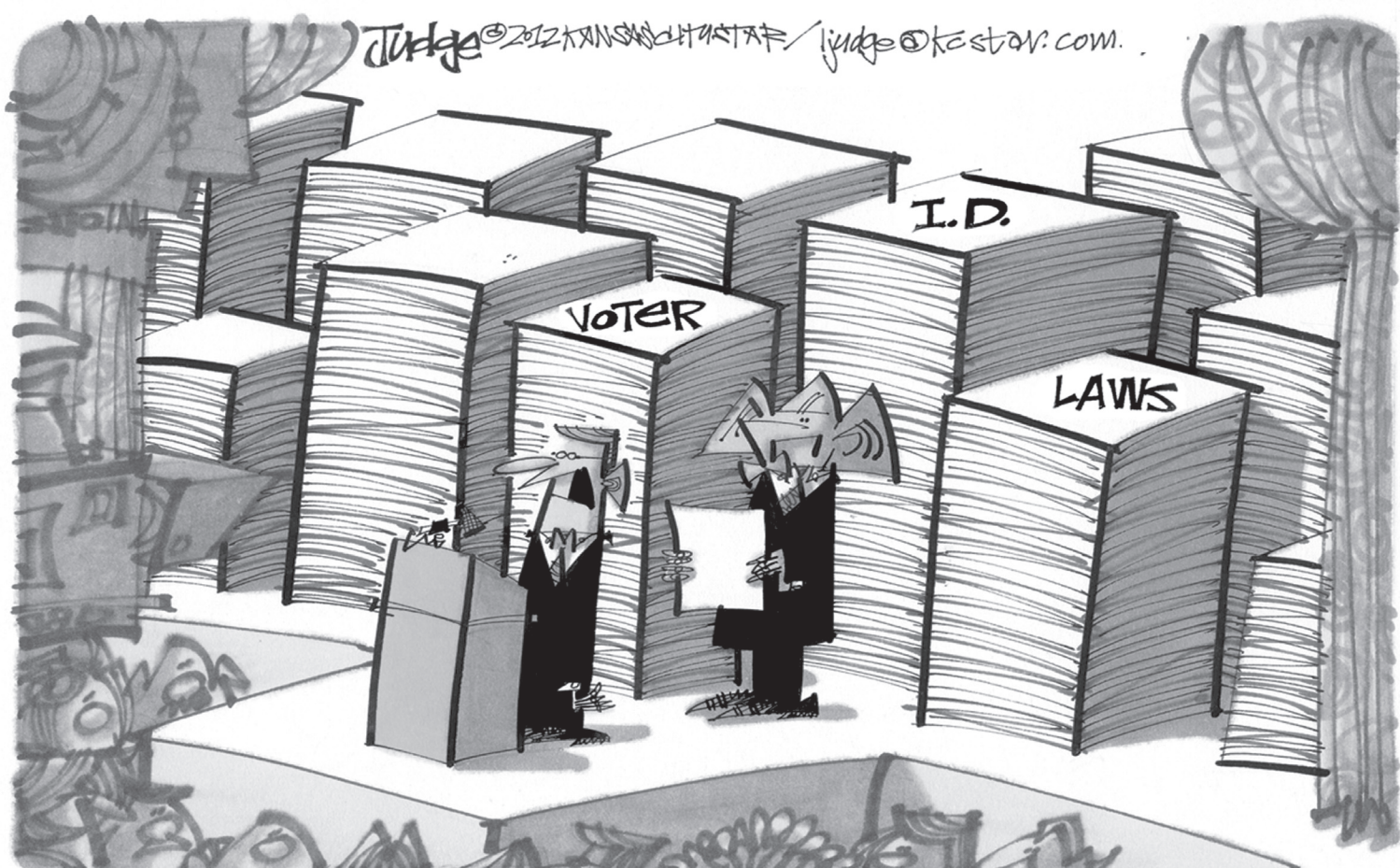
Indeed, Americans have cut back on several other types of borrowing such as credit card use, with average household indebtedness falling from \$105,297 in 2007 to \$100,720 in 2010.

That does not appear to be happening with education-related debt, however, presumably because individuals and families have concluded that higher education possesses a value transcending price. The average outstanding college debt increased from \$23,349 in 2007 to \$26,682 in 2010.

But insensitivity to education costs cannot be presumed. Data released Sept. 27 by the Kansas Board of Regents raises the question of whether the state's system may have already reached its point of sensitivity. The Regents reported that enrollment was down 152 students at the public universities. Fortunately for Manhattan, K-State was an exception to the trend, reporting the largest increase among the state institutions, up 515 students.

But contrast the movement at the seven universities with a 13.4 percent increase at the state's technical college and it becomes fair to ask whether some families are re-evaluating the usefulness of a four-year college degree if getting that degree forces them into debt.

– The Manhattan Mercury, via the Associated Press



"AND NOW A WORD FROM THE PEOPLE WHO HATE GOVERNMENT REGULATION."

Superstitions change through time

I often wonder, if after Jim and I are gone, our children will sit around and laugh about the strange superstitions and beliefs we had.

I know that Jim and I often talk and laugh about some of the weird things that our ancestors said to us or told us to do as we were growing up.

Jim likes to tell about the time he had a large seed wart on his hand that he couldn't seem to get rid of. His grandmother Mead told him to steal his mother's dish rag and bury it out in the back yard and when the rag rotted, his wart would disappear.

Even though he waited several days, the wart didn't vanish like he expected. Finally, he treated it with wart medication and later it was torn off his hand during a wrestling match at school, roots and all. After that, it never came back, but that might have been because the dish rag finally rotted.

The funniest thing that we still laugh about is when Jim's mom, Polly, heard that if she tied ribbons around Jim's dad's ankles before he went to bed, he wouldn't get leg cramps. So before Ralph went to bed that night, Polly tied pink satin ribbons around his ankles.

We were vacationing with them at the time in their motor home. They were sleeping in the living room part of the motor home and we were sleeping in the bedroom part. In the middle of the night we heard the derndest racket



Marj Brown

• Marj's Snippets

going on in the living room. Things were getting knocked over and making all kinds of noise.

When we looked into the living room to see what all of the commotion was about, there was Ralph – jumping around, moaning and groaning with severe leg cramps, wearing nothing but his undershorts and with pink bows still tied around the ankles of his long skinny legs. Those ribbons obviously didn't work.

One of Jim's aunts had some rather strange ideas, too. This was made apparent when I was watching the men clean fish while we were on a family fishing trip years ago. I was pregnant at the time and Jim's aunt informed me that I shouldn't watch the men clean the fish because it might mark my baby. I have no idea what she meant by that, but I stopped watching, because I didn't want my baby coming out looking like a fish.

I don't remember too many superstitions on my side of the family, but I'm sure there were

plenty. I do remember one thing, though it's not so much a superstition as it was a fun thing that Mom always did. It happened because we didn't have such things as tea bags when I was a child. We would just put a spoonful of tea leaves in a cup and pour boiling water over them and let it sit with a saucer or something over the top to keep the steam in for a few minutes.

After we drank all the tea, the leaves were always arranged in the bottom of the cup in various designs. Mom would look at the leaves and pretend to tell our fortunes like a fortune teller. I don't remember exactly what she told us, but I do remember that some of the fortunes were funny.

Jim claims that he doesn't have any superstitions, but I obviously do. I will never walk under a ladder, I am very careful not to break mirrors and, for a long time, I wouldn't step on a crack for fear it might break my mother's back. However, now I am lucky if I can see a crack, much less step over it, and my mother is in a better place where I don't have to worry about her anymore.

Marj Brown has lived in Colby for 62 years and has spent a good deal of that time writing about people and places here. She says it's one of her favorite things to do.

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Could strategy in Syria lead to genocide?

Rocked by ongoing violence and protests in the Middle East and the tragic death of Ambassador Stevens in Libya, U.S. policy toward the region seems in crisis. Sen. John McCain has characterized our Middle East foreign policy as "feckless," while others have questioned why there appears to be widespread mistrust of U.S. intentions in the region.

Syria represents a particularly difficult challenge for U.S. geopolitical strategists as the civil war rages on, with instability and the mounting deaths and displacement of innocent civilians spilling over to neighboring states. Is it possible that the current thrust of U.S. policy towards Syria might lead to a frightening genocide there, in part because of the absence of critical geopolitical thinking about Syria's culture and territory?

As the Arab Spring unfolded in 2011, the U.S. shifted away from its long-standing policy of overt and tacit support for many of the region's dictators and strongmen. It embraced what it saw as change from below that could spur the development of a more inclusive democratic political system. Critics argued that this policy shift was simply one of convenience and pragmatism, given the ouster and/or death of long-time leaders from Tunisia to Egypt.

As the Syrian revolution took flame in the streets of Aleppo, Damascus and Homs aiming to topple the Al-Assad regime, the U.S. lent its support to the Syrian rebels hoping to facilitate the downfall of Ba'ath government. This, in turn, could shift the balance of power in the region, ostensibly to the detriment of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Herein lies the dilemma for U.S. geopolitical strategy: trying to accommodate Syria's cultural realities while supporting the ouster of President Al-Assad. Political, military and economic power since the 1960s rests with the minority Alawi, who number less than two

Other Opinions

• David Keeling
Geographical Society

million or about 12 percent of the country's population.

Although considered a Shi'a sect, the Alawi religious doctrine deviates significantly from mainstream Shi'a beliefs and the dominant Sunni have long viewed the Alawi with disdain. Under French occupation in the early 20th century, the Alawi were given significant autonomy over territory in western Syria along the Mediterranean coast, known as the Alawite State. Today, the Alawi can be found also on the plains around Homs and Hama, with significant concentrations in Aleppo and Damascus.

The geopolitical options for U.S. policy toward Syria seem to put the U.S. in a no-win situation. If the U.S. continues to support the predominantly Sunni Syrian rebels, either a mass exodus of Alawis or revenge killings leading to potential genocide are likely. Alawi Syrians have been viewed by Sunnis as religious heretics and enemies for centuries, and old hatreds die hard, as witnessed in Iraq, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere around the world.

A divide-and-conquer approach to the region, perhaps hopeful of encouraging greater Sunni anger towards Iranian Shiites, likely would misfire and provoke more regional sectarian violence. Indeed, cynics argue that the U.S. only courts the region's Sunni leaders because of oil and petrodollars and is more concerned about political-economic stability than

democracy.

Nonetheless, perhaps the only viable solution to the Syrian crisis is the Balkan model, with the partition of Syria to establish an Alawi homeland in the traditional western territory known as Latakia. Whatever path is chosen, Syrian innocents will continue to die in ever-increasing numbers unless the U.S. and the international community provide a viable geopolitical option acceptable to both sides.

An Alawi genocide would set back U.S. interests in the Middle East for decades and further destabilize an already fragile region.

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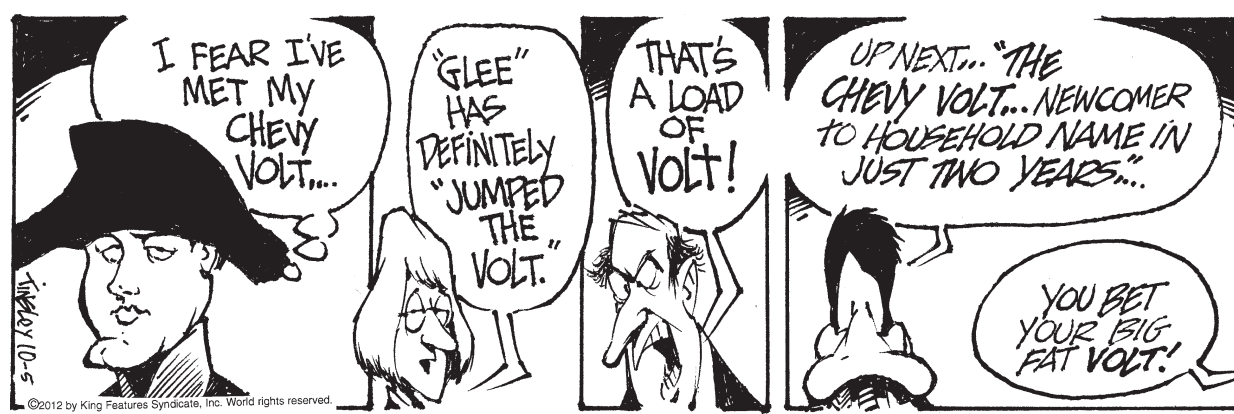
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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley



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