

MIKE ROYKO

# Expanding sin taxes could solve a long list of social ills

"I resent it," yelled Slat Grobnik, taking a puff on his cigarette and sipping his Polish vodka.

Calm yourself and tell me what you resent.

"Look at this," he said, thumping his newspaper. "It says here that President Hillary is gonna partly finance health care with a sin tax. Get that? Sin tax."

Yes, but so what? We all know that smoking and boozing are not good for one's health. So the logic is that those who engage in self-destructive behavior should pay something extra. Maybe it will encourage them to lead cleaner lives.

"OK, I can't beef about that. But how come they call it 'sin'? It's legal, ain't it?"

Yes, but smoking is not exemplary behavior. The Clintons, being yuppies influenced by the '60s, would like to discourage this vice to reduce health costs.

"Sure, I ain't gonna be no health club man of the year. But how come the only 'sin' politicians tax are smoking and drinking?"

What do you have in mind?

"Well, what about those greasy hickburgers Clinton eats? Any doc will tell you they're worse than a pop of hooh."

True, in moderation, a word that is foreign to you, a drink or two discourages heart ailments. But

"Don't give me no buts. I'm tired of being the only sinner in America. Why don't they tax greasy fast food that clogs up the ticker?"

Don't be silly. Voting for a federal tax on the Big

Mac would be the death of any politician.

"OK, then I got some other ideas for a sin tax program."

Such as?

"Well, like Rostenkowski says, he don't care if a smoker pays \$10 a pack. I think that congressmen should pay 100 percent of their graft."

Graft is a strong word.

"Hey, they take big bucks — millions of dollars — from these outfits called PACs."

Yes, political action committees.

Right. Contributions. That's another word for graft — because those PACs are just buying votes. So if we tax the graft 100 percent, the politicians don't get nothing, and they won't have to vote the way those big-buck PACs bribe them. They'll have to vote their consciences. Of course, you'll have to spell 'conscience' for them."

But without the PAC money, they might not be re-elected.

Then let them go out and get left jobs like the rest of us. I mean, where does it say in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights that a congressman has the right to be on the take big time?"

You have a point. But that will not raise enough money to finance the Clintons' health care program.

"Course not. But I got other 'sin' taxes. Like my tax for getting married?"

You would tax people for getting married?

"Sure. But if they stay married, after 10 years they get one-third back. Twenty years, they get another third. Thirty years, the rest."

So this is a divorce tax.

"You got it. Big expense, divorce. Ties up the courts. The taxpayers got to pay the judges and shrinks to be mediators because two goofs can't agree on how many oranges they should have and which ma or pa will make the kids most miserable. Let them pay a federal tax."

An interesting concept. And?

"We ought to have a president tax. No president should get paid more than he ever made as a private citizen. I figure Clinton would make about \$8 a week, which is about what he got when he dealt the grandpa's grocery store, which was the last time he wasn't living off the taxpayer."

That seems fair. Of course, when they leave office, they get enormous perks.

"No perks. Let them write dull books like Nixon does. And then I got the dumb sports goof tax."

Explain that.

"Sure. The worst brain-killer in America is sports. Ask the average American yahoo about the deal between Israel and the PLO and he don't know zilch. But he knows the spread on all the football games. So there should be a federal sin tax on every sports ticket, every phone call made to a sports line show and every inch of every newspaper's sports section. This sports stuff sucks out our brains. Pretty soon, we'll all be as dumb as the athletes, and we'll all have to hire agents, who ought to be taxed 99 percent. And then there is this rap stuff."

What about rap?

"Any time they use rotten language, they're taxed 99 percent. But we'll give them a write-off if they have their tongues cut off. And you want to hear about my gay tax?"

Careful, I am professionally obligated to be politically correct and not offend.

"Not me. Hey, in San Francisco you can't smoke in no public buildings and they are thinking of banning smoking in their restaurants and even their baseball park. And in L.A. you can't smoke in a restaurant."

So?

"So this: In San Francisco and L.A., they ain't banned no hanky-panky in those gay bathhouses. And that kind of hanky-panky is a fast way to catch a killer disease. And we're all paying to find a cure for it. So I would put a \$60 hanky-panky tax on everybody who goes into a men's hanky-panky bathhouse anywhere in the United States. That ought to raise a few bucks for health reform."

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anything else. Sure, Clinton proposes huge cuts in future Medicare and Medicaid spending. But these changes, he insists, will come entirely from greater efficiencies, reduced payments to hospitals and doctors and perhaps from higher premiums for the very affluent.

The overwhelming majority of retirees need not worry a bit, but as former Sens. Warren Rudman, R-N.H., and Paul Tsongas, D-Mass., argue in their latest treatise on reducing the federal deficit, if we don't stop assuming that older Americans of all income levels are entitled to ever-expanding government benefits, current and future workers will have to yield more and more of their earnings to pay for them.

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Eventually, working people will rebel, electing politicians who will slash entitlement programs indiscriminately. Rudman and Tsongas warn: "There will be a generational conflict pitting American against American, child against parent, in a way that our nation has not seen before."

The lobbyists for and the politicians who come before the elderly must change. The elderly cannot continue to demand an ever-larger share of the pie when for their children the pie is shrinking.

Mike Royko is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune.



### BOOKS

## There's no doubt Ivins can sure turn a phrase

By Susan Campbell

There isn't much about Texas to endear itself to a native Missourian like me. Everything's too big out there, including the egos.

But Texas has Molly Ivins, America's wisest and funniest political columnist, bar none. And you can't hate a face that gives you a mind like that.

If you haven't the wherewithal to move to Texas to read this newspaper columnist/pundit, at least Ivins, of the late Dallas Times Herald and now with the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, is being published all over creation — with this, her latest book, and with columns in The New York Times, Time, Newsweek, Mother Jones and The Progressive. (She also appears regularly in The Capital Times.) She's been on "Nightline" and is now a certified "arthur," as they say in East Texas, with her second book (after "Molly Ivins Can't Say That, Can She?" which for some of us was subtitled "I Wish I'd Said That").

They say a lot of things in East Texas, and most of it bears repeating. They say in the book world that recycled newspaper columns don't sell. And they don't, unless they're by an elite group of three or four writers that includes Ivins. These columns stretch back to October 1981, and it's wonderfully refreshing to relive recent history through the sharp-eyed and incredibly well-informed Ivins.

Ivins on a bad day is still pretty darn good.

Witness this, on the 1992 presidential campaign:

"Trying to save populism from the fangless inanity to which the American political press keeps trying to consign it is damn near full-time work these days. The next reporter who refers to David Duke as a populist ought to be Bushhurried, as they now say in Japan, meaning to have someone puke in your lap."

**Notin' But Good Times Ahead**

By Molly Ivins  
Random House  
\$23; 255 pp.

And on Camille Paglia, one of women's greatest threats and loose cannons:

"There is one area in which I think Paglia and I would agree that politically correct feminism has produced a noticeable inequity. Nowadays, when a woman behaves in a hysterical and disagreeable fashion, we say, 'Poor dear, it's probably PMS.' Whereas, if a man behaves in a hysterical and disagreeable fashion, we say, 'What an asshole.' Let me leap to correct this unfairness by saying of Paglia, 'Sheesh, what an asshole.'"

And, on Patrick Buchanan's venus of fear at last year's Republican national convention:

"Many people did not care for Pat Buchanan's speech; it probably sounded better in the original German."

This is American political press coverage at its absolute finest, better'n a bottle of Cuervo and a fine-tuned pickup. We should all write this way, but we don't. That's a shame, isn't it?

Probably if we'd had Ivins' good fortune to have been raised around the Texas Shiite Baptists, wedded on the nutsy-crazy-kooky Texas legislature (affectionately called "The Lege"), and allowed rein as only those Texans can allow themselves, we might have been contenders.

Ivins is on a roll now, but don't worry that it will turn her head. As she says herself — twice, on quoting political organizer Saul Alinsky: "Don't worry, boys, we'll weather this storm of approval and come out as hated as ever."

• Susan Campbell reviewed this book for the Hartford Courant.

### Guest column

MARIE COCCO

## Elderly are breaking young Americans

Of all the millions of words disgorged by the White House about its health care plans, few are more crucial than these: Medicare will remain a separate program under the new system. States must guarantee that all eligible beneficiaries have equal or better coverage than they had under Medicare.

Much has been said about how the plan treats the elderly, the largest and most expensive group of health care consumers. Most commentary has lauded President Clinton's cleverness in co-opting one of Washington's most powerful, crucial lobbies.

But the long-term ramifications are dire. For Clinton is perpetuating, perhaps exacerbating, policies that have turned the federal budget into a vast exchange in which money flows from one group of mostly middle-class people — young workers — to another mostly middle-class group — their parents.

Under his plan, Medicare would remain a separate program, unlike Medicaid for the poor, which would effectively be merged into the proposed health "alliances," with all their benefits — and restrictions. Medicare coverage would get richer. Reimbursement for prescription drugs would be added, as would some coverage for long-term care.

What's more, Medicare recipients would continue to be able to choose their own doctors, unlike most other Americans who would be pushed into health-maintenance plans that limit choice. The Clinton plan requires

regional health alliances to offer a traditional fee-for-service plan that "offers the Medicare benefit package at no greater cost to the beneficiary than traditional Medicare." If the alliance plan is more generous than Medicare, "the cost to the beneficiary can still be no greater than under traditional Medicare."

For those 55 to 65 who choose to take early retirement, Clinton offers a windfall: "The government would assume 80 percent of the cost of health insurance, with the remaining 20 percent paid by the former employer or by the individual. This \$10 billion-a-year bonanza is meant to relieve the auto industry and other mature industries of their huge obligations to retirees under union contracts negotiated a generation ago. It also would spare early retirees from the fear of unilateral benefits cuts."

Another likely consequence: More people will retire early, and more companies will offer "buyouts" and other incentives to get out. What's wrong with this? As a matter of social policy, nothing. Social Security and Medicare were two great social experiments that worked: Together, they enable the aged to maintain a standard of living that would be unimaginable without them.

But, fiscally, they are squeezing us so tightly we haven't the money for much of

anything else. Sure, Clinton proposes huge cuts in future Medicare and Medicaid spending. But these changes, he insists, will come entirely from greater efficiencies, reduced payments to hospitals and doctors and perhaps from higher premiums for the very affluent.

The overwhelming majority of retirees need not worry a bit, but as former Sens. Warren Rudman, R-N.H., and Paul Tsongas, D-Mass., argue in their latest treatise on reducing the federal deficit, if we don't stop assuming that older Americans of all income levels are entitled to ever-expanding government benefits, current and future workers will have to yield more and more of their earnings to pay for them.

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The lobbyists for and the politicians who come before the elderly must change. The elderly cannot continue to demand an ever-larger share of the pie when for their children the pie is shrinking.

Marie Cocco is a Newsday editorial writer based in Washington.

### Reader response

CARL A. ZICHELLA & AL MATANO

## Convo center EIS was a whitewash

A recent editorial in The Capital Times criticized the Sierra Club for its opposition to the proposed Monona Terrace project. Unfortunately, the editorial failed to detail the substantive reasons for our opposition. We believe our position is sound and responsible. Here's why we believe the project needs to be reconsidered, reconfigured or stopped:

■ The environmental impact statement prepared by the Department of Administration does not meet the legal standards required by the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act (WEPA).

■ Lakefront parks and open greenspace make our city special. They are constantly threatened by development and need to be protected. Any development proposal that radically changes a lakefront park, no matter how beneficial, should not be permitted to subvert the environmental review process.

We are committed to working in any forum to achieve these goals, but we believe we can't stand idly by while a mockery is being made of the environmental review process.

State agencies are obligated under the WEPA to conduct an environmental review process for projects of this magnitude. In response to this obligation, the DOA recently published an environmental impact statement that can best be described as a mockery.

It ignores legal requirements that DOA consider a range of alternatives (including not building the project) in preparing the document. It denies substantial state involvement in the project. It falsely asserts that no federal permits are required, even as they filed an application for a

necessary federal permit under the Clean Water Act.

One question that needs to be asked is: If DOA isn't required to do an EIS, why is it doing one at all? This constitutes an official threat to the integrity of environmental decision-making in Wisconsin. DOA's effort wouldn't hold water if it were being applied to a mine, state facility or

other project. Why should it be acceptable here?

Throughout this process we have played unfairly. We have filed comments in a timely manner outlining these and many other concerns with the document.

An environmental review of the Monona Terrace project was promised to citizens voting in the November 1992 referendum. The people did not give a sweeping mandate — they gave limited approval based on guarantees that the project would protect the environment and stay within strict budget guidelines. We believe the DOA's EIS breaks that promise by failing to consider a range of construction alternatives.

People who know the Sierra Club understand that we take measured, well-considered steps. While we're not afraid to litigate

when a case calls for it, we follow the administrative procedure we're required to before we sue. Nor do we file gratuitous suits. We may not file suit in this case; time will tell. We negotiate to improve worthwhile projects and minimize their impacts.

Reasonable people can make a credible argument that Monona Terrace could serve as a vehicle to reduce suburban sprawl. We are committed to work with Mayor Soglin and others to achieve this goal. Perhaps this project can be reconfigured to both conform to WEPA and be environmentally beneficial.

Carl A. Zichella and Al Matano are members of the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

## Voice of the People

### Thoughts from the past hold truths for today

Dear Editor: Having read the many ideas expressed about what is wrong with education, I couldn't resist reading the following article I noticed in a 1912 issue of the Montello Express under the headline "(People That are in Demand, nor could I resist passing it on):"

"What kind of a (person) do business (people) want?" repeated a shrewd, practical man of many concerns the other day.

"Well, I will tell you the first place (they) want a (person) who doesn't know too much;

(they) generally like to run their own business and prefer someone who will listen to their way, rather than try to teach them new kinds; secondly, they want a (person) — one who understands 7 o'clock is exactly 7, not 10 minutes past; third, an industrious (person), a prompt (person) — one who takes the extra work in case of need; fourth, an honest (person) — honest in . . . service, as well as in money of dollars and cents; and fifth, a good-natured (person) who will keep (person's)

temper if (person's) employer loses (his/hers) now and then."

"But you haven't said a word about being smart!" was suggested.

"Well, to tell the truth," was the rather hesitating answer, "that's about the last thing we worry over. The fact is, if a (person) is modest, prompt, pleasant, industrious and honest, (he/she) is quite as smart as we care about — and that's a fact."

Bernelda Roberts Madison