

GUEST EDITORIAL

Government workers shouldn't live too high

It never pays for public officials to appear to be living high on the hog. Well, almost never. At least that's the advice we should have given a certain former Johns Hopkins neurosurgeon who took up politics only recently and now finds himself defending a \$31,561 dining room set the taxpayers purchased for his office suite at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. And, apparently, he didn't even get to pick it out.

The problem, of course, is that while the agency in charge of helping the poorest Americans find decent housing was ordering a custom-made table for the secretary's personal space, HUD officials were also planning how best to make substantial reductions to programs that help the elderly and homeless. And, worst of all, people noticed. A senior agency official claims Dr. Carson's wife, Candy Carson, has spearheaded an effort to spend lavishly on that same office space — even if it means going around federal rules that require congressional approval for any spending on a department head above \$5,000.

Dr. Carson's defense is that he didn't have much direct involvement and that the cost isn't out of line for such furniture. Here's what his defense should be: I'm just following the example set by my boss and fellow cabinet members.

If there's one thing that has defined Donald Trump's first year in office — aside from the incompetence and frequent lies — it's how in both policy and appearance this president and his minions have favored the wealthy and shamelessly gamed the system for their personal benefit. The tax plan approved by Congress last fall is surely the centerpiece of policies so lopsidedly tilted to the rich that investor Warren E. Buffett recently estimated his company's windfall at \$29 billion. So how's that slightly lower income tax withholding rate working

Baltimore
Sun

out for the rest of us?

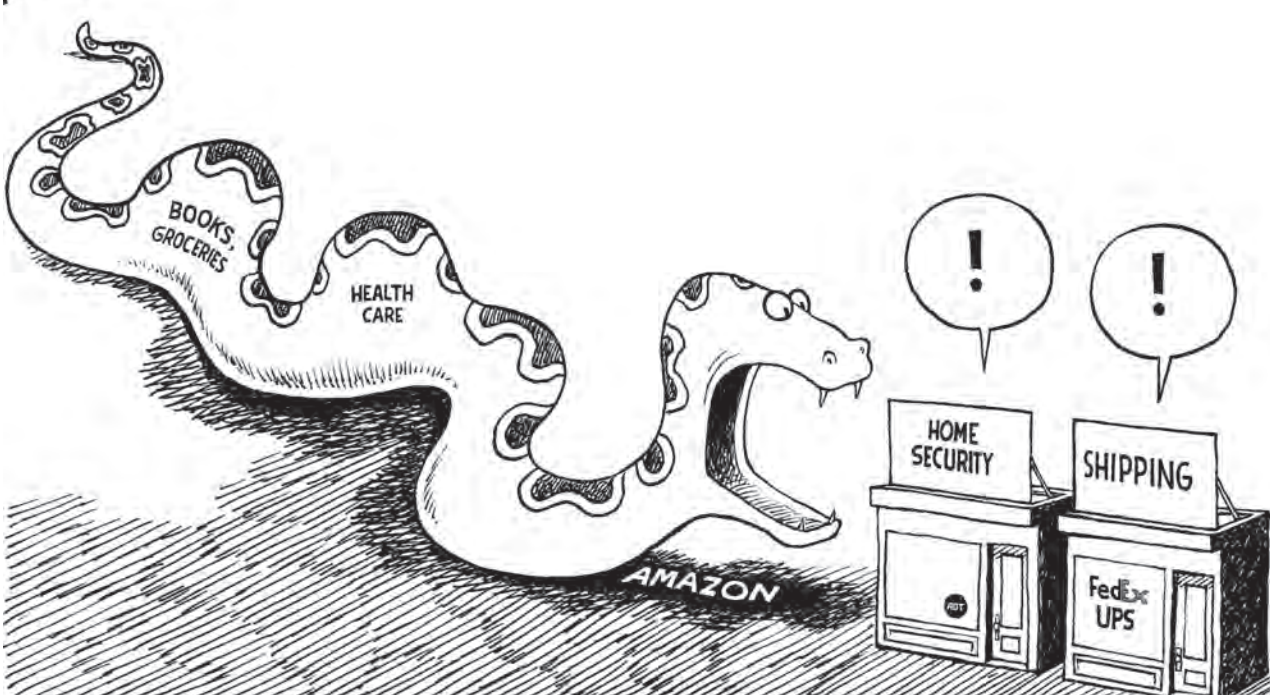
But it's not just the giveaways, it's the shameless takeaways, too. EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt doesn't fly coach when on government business, he goes strictly first class, lest he be seated next to an irate passenger. Apparently, rolling back environmental protections has its price in rude behavior from the little people who favor clean air and water but can't afford an upgrade when they fly. Where in the world did Mr. Pruitt get the idea it was acceptable to travel on the public dime with the champagne set? Maybe it was from former Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, who racked up a \$1 million tab using private and military planes.

Yet all that pales to the master of the opulent lifestyle who once criticized Barack Obama for playing golf too much only to set the presidential record for days on the links in his first year in office, spending tens of millions in taxpayer dollars (and better yet, directing many of those dollars at his own businesses) to fly to his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida at least 13 times and New Jersey's Bedminster 11.

The fact-checkers at Snopes estimate his Secret Service golf cart rental bill for 2017 at more than \$100,000 alone. NBC News calculates the president's first year in office included 130 days at Trump properties. Mr. Trump refuses to give Americans a full accounting of his personal finances, so we're kept in the dark about just how much he profits from his position and government spending at venues like his D.C. hotel or Mar-a-Lago.

This may be an administration that claims to be working for the little guy, but it's a crowd that identifies more with guys who fly in the front of the plane and play the back nine at the most exclusive clubs.

AMAZON WOULD THE STATE



NRA finally gets some resistance

President Trump has always been extremely adept at using social media — first to win the election, and then to keep his core supporters stirred up. In effect, he owns TBN, the Trump Broadcasting Network. Last year, he tweeted: "The Fake News media hates when I use what has turned out to be my very powerful Social Media — over 100 million people! I can go around them."

But while Trump might control TBN, he does not have a monopoly on social media. Other forces and interests — including many opposed to Trump and his policies — are using the same platforms to generate their own "very powerful" movements.

The latest example emerged after the tragic massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. Students promoting the hashtag #NeverAgain captured the public's attention and helped generate a groundswell of support for tighter gun laws. In a new CNN poll, 70 percent backed stricter regulations, up from 52 percent last October.

The #NeverAgain campaign resembles the recent #MeToo movement that highlighted the issue of sexual harassment. Both are bottom-up, grass-roots crusades fueled by personal experience, not ideology, and both rely heavily on social media to connect like-minded people and amplify their message.

#MeToo has toppled many prominent figures in business and entertainment. Whether #NeverAgain will produce new legislation is very much an open question. Republican leaders in Congress cower before the National Rifle Association, which opposes vir-

tually any alteration in existing rules.

If policy is slow to change, however, the politics of guns is already shifting. The student activists specifically targeted corporations that do business with the NRA — banks, airlines, insurance companies — and many quickly cut ties with the organization.

The students have added #VoteThemOut to their litany of slogans, and Republican strategists worry they will energize voters next fall — particularly moderate suburban women who might have voted for Trump, but doubt his character. Such voters have recently helped to elect Democrats as governor of Virginia and senator from Alabama.

The CNN poll reveals striking differences along gender lines: Seventy-seven percent of women favor stronger gun laws, versus 62 percent of men. Thirty-six percent of women view the NRA positively, versus 56 percent of men.

The politics of the gun issue has always favored the NRA for one reason: intensity. The organization boasts 5 million members — a tiny fraction of the America population, but those members care fanatically about their rights. They tend to judge politicians on one overriding question: Are you for us or against us?

In November, the children inspired by Parkland across the country — and their moms, who represent a good portion of those coveted suburban women voters — will get the chance to show passion and political engagement are not owned by one group or one president.

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COLUMNISTS

STEVE & COKIE
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Stuck between religious labels

Unity was the theme during the 1992 Democratic National Convention, with nominee Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary, joining hands with delegates as they sang an anthem called "Circle of Friends."

But there was a problem in the Pennsylvania delegation, where two-term Gov. Robert Casey was feeling excluded. An old-school Catholic Democrat, Casey had been denied a speaking slot during platform debates. On the convention floor, delegates were selling buttons showing him dressed as the pope — since he opposed abortion.

Months later, a coalition formed to explore whether Casey should challenge President Clinton in 1996, running on progressive economics and cultural conservatism. Pro-life Democrats like Sargent Shriver and his wife, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, were involved, but Republican Jeffrey Bell — Ronald Reagan's first full-time campaign staffer in 1976 — emerged as a team leader.

Why would a Catholic Republican back a Democrat? In a 1995 interview, Bell told me he was worried many religious voters — especially evangelicals and Catholics — had already decided they had no choice but to support GOP nominees.

"Someday, this is going to cause BIG problems for evangelicals and conservative Catholics," said Bell.

Casey died in 2000, after major heart problems closed his career.

Bell died in February, after a career in which he ran for the U.S. Senate in New Jersey — in 1978 and 2014 — but was better known for work behind the scenes helping others, following beliefs that escaped easy political

labels.

Bell wrote a letter in 2014 admitting he didn't feel driven to win elective office. He simply saw "no other way" to fight for his convictions. Barnes added: "How many candidates could honestly say they had no desire to hold office? I can think of only one."

Meanwhile, Bell lived to see New York billionaire Donald Trump stun Hillary Clinton and take the White House, amid hurricanes of Bill Clinton-style news exposes about Trump's ethics and not-so-private affairs.

These news reports consistently stress 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump, no matter what was reported about him. A recent Pew survey found that after

Trump's first year in office, white evangelical support of his conduct had declined to 61 percent.

When facing hard political choices, Bell said, Republican leaders seemed to be convinced they could "waffle" on social issues — like abortion — because the alternatives for religious conservatives were always worse on the Democratic side of the aisle.

It was crucial religious conservatives work to create more options inside America's two-party system or in whatever political structures are in "going to take shape in the future," Bell said.

"I'm no longer interested in knowing how pro-life people or morally conservative people are going to profit from their association with the GOP. We're one more betrayal from all of that spinning apart."

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