

U.S. military discharges all HIV-positive soldiers

■ OUR OPINION: Firing the infected is based on fear rather than compassion and logical thinking

"I have cancer."

"I'm sorry. You're fired."

We recoil from this scenario. How could a company fire someone who is ill but is still capable of performing his or her responsibilities? It would, in fact, be illegal — a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

This law does not apply to the U.S. military, apparently.

As part of a \$265 billion defense bill approved by the White House last week,

America's armed forces will discharge all enlisted men and women who test positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

President Clinton has promised that the soldiers who are relieved of their duty will continue to receive full medical and dental benefits. That's nice. But it doesn't speak to the larger issue of why a viable group of workers is being sent home to die.

Of course, HIV is different than many other terminal diseases. Unlike cancer, it is contagious. The military does have a vested interest in making sure that HIV-positive people are not sent into combat, where their blood could spread the virus to uninfected soldiers. However, HIV is not contagious through casual contact, and the military should assign infected personnel to non-combat posts.

People with HIV can continue to live productive lives without illness for as long as 15 years. Yet,

because we know the disease is incurable, we often treat HIV-positive people as if they were going to die tomorrow. That attitude may speed their demise.

Medical research continues to affirm that ill people who lead normal lives have a better chance of living longer. By telling HIV-positive people they are no longer capable of doing their jobs, the military tells them they are no longer living.

Not only is this policy bad for people with HIV, it is not in the best interest of the armed forces or the country. The AIDS virus continues to spread, in part, because so many Americans think the disease does not or will not affect them.

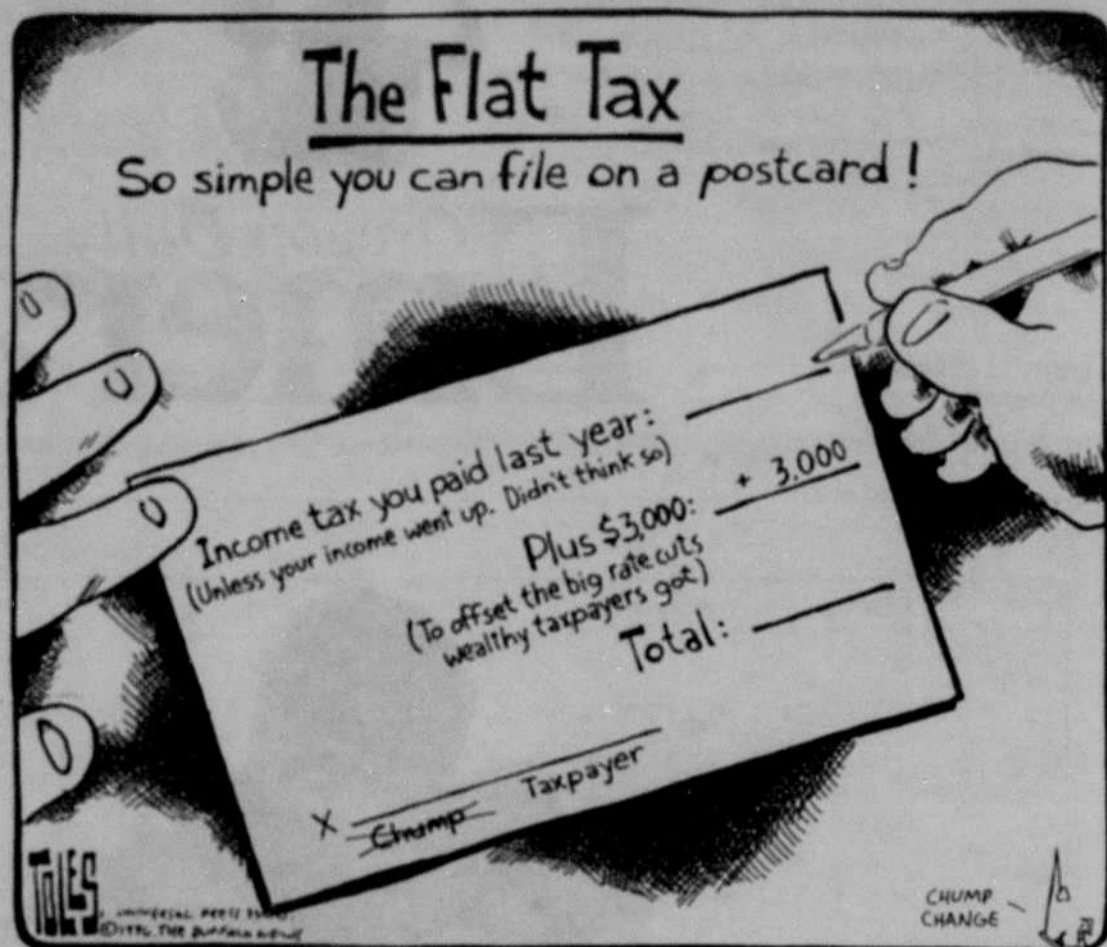
We expel HIV-positive people from their jobs and their communities, and the disease remains invisible. And the rate of infection continues to rise.

When the bill takes effect, 1,049 men and women will be discharged from their military posts. Instead, infected personnel should be allowed to keep their jobs and serve their country until they are no longer able to work.

Out of this pool of dedicated personnel, a few may be brave enough to tell their stories to their peers. Some may even be hired to conduct seminars about the disease and its prevention.

Americans from all walks of life and in all occupations are living with this disease. If we learn from them instead of fearing them, we may be able to curb the rise of HIV infection and extend some valuable lives in the process.

Imagine a policy that did that.



Flat tax steals from lower, middle class

It doesn't take much arm-twisting to make me admit I am a Marxist at heart. Just think of it — everyone has enough money, a direct say in the world around them and complete job satisfaction.

It also doesn't take much for me to admit that I think it is impossible. The ideals of Marxism always seem to crumble to the realities of communism, making me glad I live in a capitalistic democracy.

We are surrounded by paradoxes like this every day. A plan sounds and looks great for everyone on paper, but before the ink has dried, the problems are already self-evident.

The flat tax in many ways reminds me of Marxism. It looks good, but it ends up with the rich getting richer and the poor becoming only more downtrodden.

What makes the flat tax sound so good to so many people? A lot of things — some unfortunately distorted. The first and most obvious is the complete mess our current tax system is in. With 437 forms to choose from and a seven-million-word federal income tax code, it can be more than a little intimidating.

Former Rep. Jack Kemp, who currently leads the Republican commission calling for the flat tax replacement, said, "The present system is beyond repair. It is impossibly complex, outrageously expensive, overly intrusive, economically destructive and manifestly unfair."

As a way to "correct" this unfairness, individuals would pay one flat tax (depending on the plan; Phil Gramm's 16 percent, Stephen Forbes' 17 percent; or Kemp's 19 percent).

What a great idea. Think of that. Taxes at a steady level of about 18 percent, while most middle-income taxpayers currently fall in the 15- or 28-percent brackets.

Even the very wealthiest of Americans would only have to pay 18 percent instead of the 39.6 percent they currently pay.

And, of course, the country would have plenty of money, right?

Wrong. Before the flat tax, the poorest of the poor pay 15 percent in taxes while the richest pay 39 percent, but after the flat tax is implemented, the poor don't pay at all and the rich pay a mere 21 percent.

And not only would taxes "plummet," but the flat tax would end the taxation of interest dividends and capital gains (profit on sale of stocks or other investments). So just where is all that money coming from?

Ah, from the not-so-deep pockets of the lower and middle classes. As Bob McIntyre (head of the labor-backed Citizens for Tax Justice) so eloquently states, "It's a bunch of rich Republican business types who got together and put out a wish list that doesn't come close to adding up... it would add hundreds of billions to the budget

deficit."

The extra money comes from the elimination of traditional deductions — not only state and local taxes and money given to charity, but, and this is a big one, mortgage interest payments.

Something smells fishy, and it's not the catch of the day.

States are published daily about how good life would be with a flat tax. Don't get too excited, though. While flat tax supporters are the first to point out that many middle class (if

you consider married with no children and earning over \$100,000 yearly middle class, that is) are in the 31-percent tax bracket.

Under the current tax system, you are taxed only on the amount of money you make in a specific bracket (example for the couple: 15 percent on the first \$39,000; 28 percent on the next \$55,250 and 31 percent on the remaining) making their tax bill add up to about 23 percent of their income.

That is still 6 percent above Forbes' suggested tax rate, which is just one reason you will see him clinging to it so stridently. Not only is 2 percent not an especially large amount to save, studies show that once a flat tax goes over 20 percent, taxpayer support starts dropping (*The Oregonian*, Jan. 23).

Oddly enough, these cuts are not being put there by the party known for its support of citizens on the lower rungs of the economic ladder, but by big business and the very wealthy.

In order to comfort voters (who would rightly think that the tax rate would have to rise and rise), proponents have also included a stipulation to make it difficult for the tax to be raised (either a three-fifths or a two-thirds vote within Congress).

So even when the mistake was noticed, it would be almost impossible to rectify. They argue that this tax would stimulate business enough to make up for the lost income.

While some politicians are blasted for their "tax and spend" policies, this group holds the "don't tax and spend anyway" ideology.

If you think this sounds familiar, remember the theory of trickle-down economics that worked great 120 years ago but not so great in the 1980s. Consider the current national debt and the spending procedures that put it there.

Can we really afford another lesson on outdated Industrialist-era economics? Unfortunately, it looks like we are about to get one, and it's already obvious who's going to pocket the bill.

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