

EDITORIAL

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Gary Ann Taylor
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Laphael Knight
Graphic Designer

Iesha Williams
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Larry J. Jackson, Sr.
Editor

Mark Washington
Distribution Manager

Joy Ramos
Copy Editor

Tony Washington
Director of Advertising

Contributing Writers:

Professor McKinley Burt,
Lee Perlman,
Yema Measho
Richard Luccetti

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.,
Portland, Oregon 97211
503-288-0033 • Fax 503-288-0015
Email: Pdxobserv@aol.com

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PARTIAL VICTORY FOR BLACK FARMERS

We often hear the joke about the person knocking on the door and saying, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you." Well, this time, for African American farmers the phrase may be true. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently settled a long-standing class action lawsuit brought by the National Black Farmers Association on behalf of 1,000 of its members.

Under the settlement, the Agriculture Department has agreed to pay as much as \$300 million dollars for claims dating back 16 years to black farmers who have an active discrimination case or who file an affidavit of discrimination that names specific individuals in the Agriculture Department who denied them loans. Those eligible will be able to get a \$50,000 tax-free payment and will have all their debts to the Agriculture Department forgiven. If they have better documentation they can forego \$50,000 pay-

ment and negotiate with an arbitrator for a higher payment.

The discrimination faced by thousands of black farmers is a legacy of the Reagan administration, which dismantled the Agriculture Department Office of Civil Rights. While the black farmers watched white farmers receive loans, local elected county officials who disbursed the funds often told them that they had run out of dollars. John Boyd, Jr., president of the National Black Farmers Association, himself told of how the county supervisor threw his application in the trash in 1992, saying he had no more money. When investigators asked him why he had made only two loans to African American farmers, he replied that blacks were lazy. Other black farmers were required to produce evidence of agricultural and financial expertise not demanded of white farmers, or had their loans de-

layed until after the planting season. In 1997 the Agriculture Department took away much of the power of the Farm Service Agencies when many of these inequities came to light.

Farming holds a special place of honor in the African American community, since most of us are descendants of slaves who worked the land, making their owners rich. But much of that special respect has been lost over the past 25 years as fewer African Americans own fewer farms. Indeed, in the 1920 14 percent of the nation's farms were owned by blacks. By 1992, only 1 percent of farms were owned by African Americans and even that number has probably dropped in the past six years.

Sadly, this settlement may be too little and too late for some black farmers. When they were denied Agriculture Department loans, many were forced to take out

commercial loans at much higher rates and are now facing foreclosure. Thus, the \$50,000 will do little to help these farmers. Others lament their inability to expand or modernize because the government loans were unavailable to them, causing them to lose money, which they can never regain.

Moreover, many black farmers are disturbed that the settlement did not include any punishment for officials who denied them loans. However, the Agriculture Department promised to change its internal procedures for investigating bias claims and has streamlined many of its procedures. The Office of Civil Rights was re-instituted by the Clinton Administration in 1996.

Black farmers deserve a special place of honor in this nation's history. The settlement is only one step forward in their journey for justice. But it is a step forward. It's good news for us all.

Policy Makers End Month Spent On Food Stamp Budget

Last Friday marked the end of a long and frugal month for twelve Oregon policy makers who spent the four weeks living on a food stamp budget and being paired with a food stamp recipient in their district. The public officials participated in Walk a Mile, an educational program coordinated by Oregon Food Bank and sponsored by a number of other social service agencies.

The participants this year included Sen. Marilyn Shannon; Sen. Lenn Hannon; Sen. Verne Duncan; Sen. Kate Brown; Rep. Ken Messerle; Rep. Barbara Ross; Rep. Kitty Piercy; Rep. Tom Butler; Rep. Lynn Lundquist; Julia Cooley, Governor's

office; Bob Repine, Director of Housing and Community Services; and Gary Weeks, Director of Department of Human Resources.

As part of the project, pairs talked on the phone, met together over lunch or went grocery shopping together. Legislators learned about the myriad of issues facing low-income Oregonians.

Rep. Ken Messerle, Coos Bay said "Talking with her (his match) brought into focus the pressures these folks are facing." Added to the pressures of surviving on a tight budget, Messerle added, "The economy here is very depressed and looking worse all the time."

Sandra Savage, a food stamp recipient and single mother paired with Sen. Lenn Hannon of Ashland shared the difficulties of a food stamp budget.

"It's hard to live on \$237 a month on food stamps for three people; we buy what we can to make it through the month." Savage recently shared dinner with Sen. Lenn Hannon and his extended family. "We had tacos, talked about education and how hard it is to find affordable housing."

"This year's project made some profound connections between groups of people who are not often able to connect. Both legislators

and food stamp recipients expressed gratitude and understanding after having the opportunity to meet," Said Cassandra Garrison, project coordinator. She added, "the project really highlighted the void left by welfare reform, social service agencies simply are not able to fill the gap."

In addition to Oregon, eight states including Alaska, Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, Montana, New York, Ohio and Wisconsin also ran Walk a Mile projects this fall. The Walk a Mile program went national in May of 1995 when 16 members of Congress, eight Democrats and eight Republicans were matched with welfare recipients in their home districts.

What Social Security "Crisis"?

The same economic interests whose political representatives were opposed to Social Security (SS) in 1935 are still against it in 1999—the privatizers. Their trick is to invent a political "crisis" over the public program of SS in order to propagate a political outcry for privatization.

Politicians mess with SS at their peril. Every American has a stake in SS and it has worked well for 64 years. To conservatives' consternation, it is the largest, most successful and most popular "centralized," "big government," bureaucratic, "costly," "entitlement" program in American history. The national Council of Senior Citizens reports that in 1997 the U.S. spent slightly less entitlements, as a percentage of GDP, than it did in 1983. In fact, since 1976 entitlement spending has risen only eight-tenths of one percent of GDP. SS spends about one percent of total program expenses on administration, compared to the insurance industry, which spends between 12 and 14 percent.

SS provides universal portability and nearly universal protection. Ninety-six percent of those now working (nearly 142 million people) are covered, while less than half of Americans with private pension plans are covered, and that number is eroding. Without SS, 54 percent of the elderly would be in poverty.

SS was designed as one leg of a three-legged stool, the others being private plans and personal savings. It was created to provide economic security for millions of Americans in retirement caused as a response to a collapsed stock markets in the first place, the Great Depression. Economic globalization means any collapse in the 1930s. If people choose to risk their disposable income in the stock market they can do that today without privatizing SS. It is ironic that at a time when half the nation does not have a pension, and few have any sav-

ings at all, SS is the leg of the stool under attack.

Wall Street, private banks and financial corporations are spending millions of dollars to lobby for their favorite SS solution of risky private investments for greater average individual return. However, average in the stock market is the middle of two extremes—winners and losers. SS is not a funded pension or retirement system with your name on it, designed solely to benefit individuals. It is a transfer program where today's workers pay today's beneficiaries. Therefore, it is an economic security program designed to protect society.

In contrast, the privatization plan favored by Wall Street is rooted in "market values" that would generate

\$240 billion in investment management and administrative fees between now and 2010. The fact that privatization would reduce the rate of return beneficiaries receive by a full percentage point seems only an ancillary concern to free marketeers.

We are told by some that we must acknowledge that the SS system as we know it is in trouble. In fact, we are told it is in crisis, and that it needs to be fixed! Various reforms are being suggested, including some drastic ones, such as raising SS taxes, cutting benefits, taxing SS as ordinary income, extending retirement to age 70, modifying cost-of-living adjustments, means testing SS beneficiaries. But most of all, to save it, we must privatize it to gain a greater return. BALONEY!

What is actually needed to fix SS is a minor correction; an adjustment similar to others made in the past, most recently in 1993. Even more importantly, we need to focus on balanced economic growth with a commitment, a policy and a concrete plan, built around national and international monetary and fiscal policy, to establish a peacetime full employment economy. If we were truly committed to full employment, the SS crisis would completely go away.

If we truly want to give all Americans unprecedented economic security, both during their working years and in retirement, we will commit ourselves to a peacetime full employment economy.

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