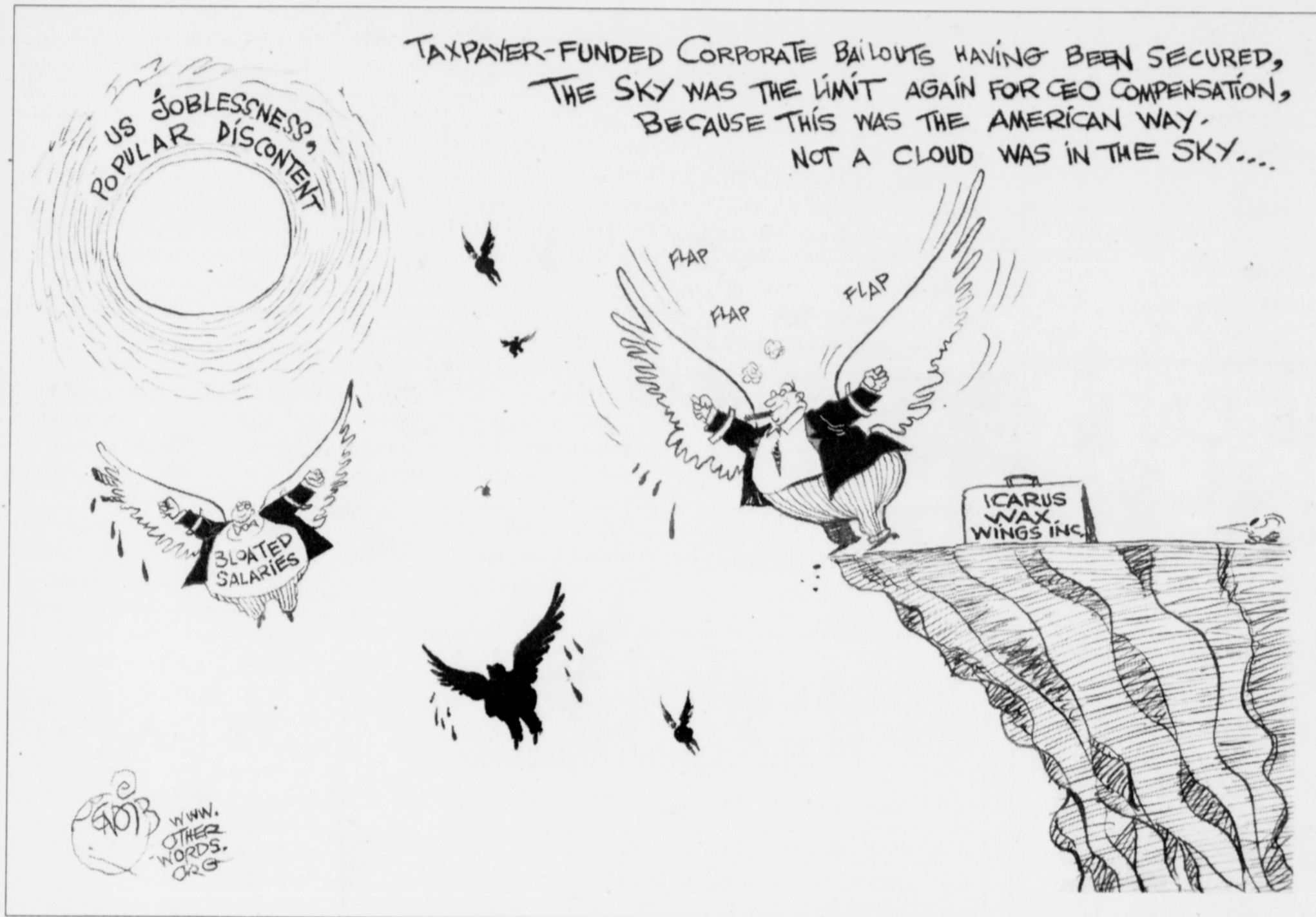



OPINION



 **New Prices Effective May 1, 2010**

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A small distance/travel charge may be applied

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Bigotry's Icy Grip is Thawing

Don't Ask, Don't Care

Made top sergeant, Earned my way; Till they found out I was gay.

BY WILLIAM A. COLLINS



The glacial progress toward equality for gay Americans offers some revealing looks at our society. One is the weakening hold of religion, Roman Catholicism in particular. Until recently, church bias against homosexuals was plainly understood, unspoken, unchallenged, and accepted.

No longer. That underlying bulwark of morality is now widely perceived as bigotry. For example, at Jesuit-run Marquette University a great uproar ensued when the school revoked a deanship offered to a lesbian professor. In other days not only would there never have been an offer, but she probably would never have become a professor. And surely faculty and students would never have raised such a howl.

Other religions are in turmoil too. Episcopalians are breaking into separate churches over the issue, and

while northern Methodists lean toward allowing gay clergy, Southerners control the votes. Lutherans

are similarly divided. Mormons of course remain officially opposed, but church fathers (there are no church mothers) recently supported an anti-discrimination ordinance to protect gays in Salt Lake City. Black churches, however, fear that homosexuality threatens the basic family, and in Africa churches have succeeded in making same-sex relationships a serious felony.

Then there's our military. The Commander-in-Chief, Defense Secretary and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs have now called for repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. But the individual service chiefs aren't so sure. Naturally all this internal tension gives gay-intolerant politicians room to maneuver. So with such rampant indecision still on the loose, Defense Secretary Robert Gates is simply changing procedures making it much harder to enforce the law that ejects gays from the service.

Social tolerance seems to be advancing quite nicely without us in other countries. Most Western militaries think we're kidding about banning gays. They never could under-

stand Americans anyway. And now several Catholic countries are loosening up their wedding rules.

Portugal lately became the sixth European nation to sanctify gay marriage, and Argentina just broke the ice in South America by court decree. It seems that its constitution, like many of our own state constitutions, contains an inconvenient "equal rights" clause. Mexico City has actually voted to allow same-sex marriage. More sleepless nights in the Vatican.

Back here at home, these social battles rage on. California, which includes many progressive-voting communities, actually approved a gay marriage ban in 2008. Citing the Constitution's guarantee of equal rights, a federal district court recently overturned the ban, but that decision

doesn't alter the population's basic sentiment. The final outcome will probably be decided by our Supreme Court, which is dominated by a conservative majority.

Meanwhile, most lawmakers still seem convinced that in their hearts the "silent majority" of voters oppose gay rights. Whether these public passions stem from fear of sin or "otherness," or real concern for "family values" is hard to measure. What can be measured is that this icy grip on a big chunk of our population is gradually thawing and that automatic hard line opponents of equality are now faced with meaningful political opposition.

OtherWords columnist William A. Collins is a former state representative and a former mayor of Norwalk, Conn.

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