

EDITORIAL

A moment we can't forget

No student attending Baker High School now had yet been born on that sunny September morning that changed America forever.

Twenty years.

Two decades.

There are many ways to measure the divide between today and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Some are purely numerical. Others, like the reference to current students at BHS, reflect this span of time in a way perhaps more surprising than straight statistics.

Nearly one generation of Americans has no memory of that day.

For those of us who were alive, and old enough to form specific and lasting recollections about the moment we heard what had happened — and what was still happening — the memories likely remain vivid.

The significance of even epochal events such as 9/11 inevitably fades, of course.

The years pass and they yield their dismal harvest of fresh tragedies and historic happenings.

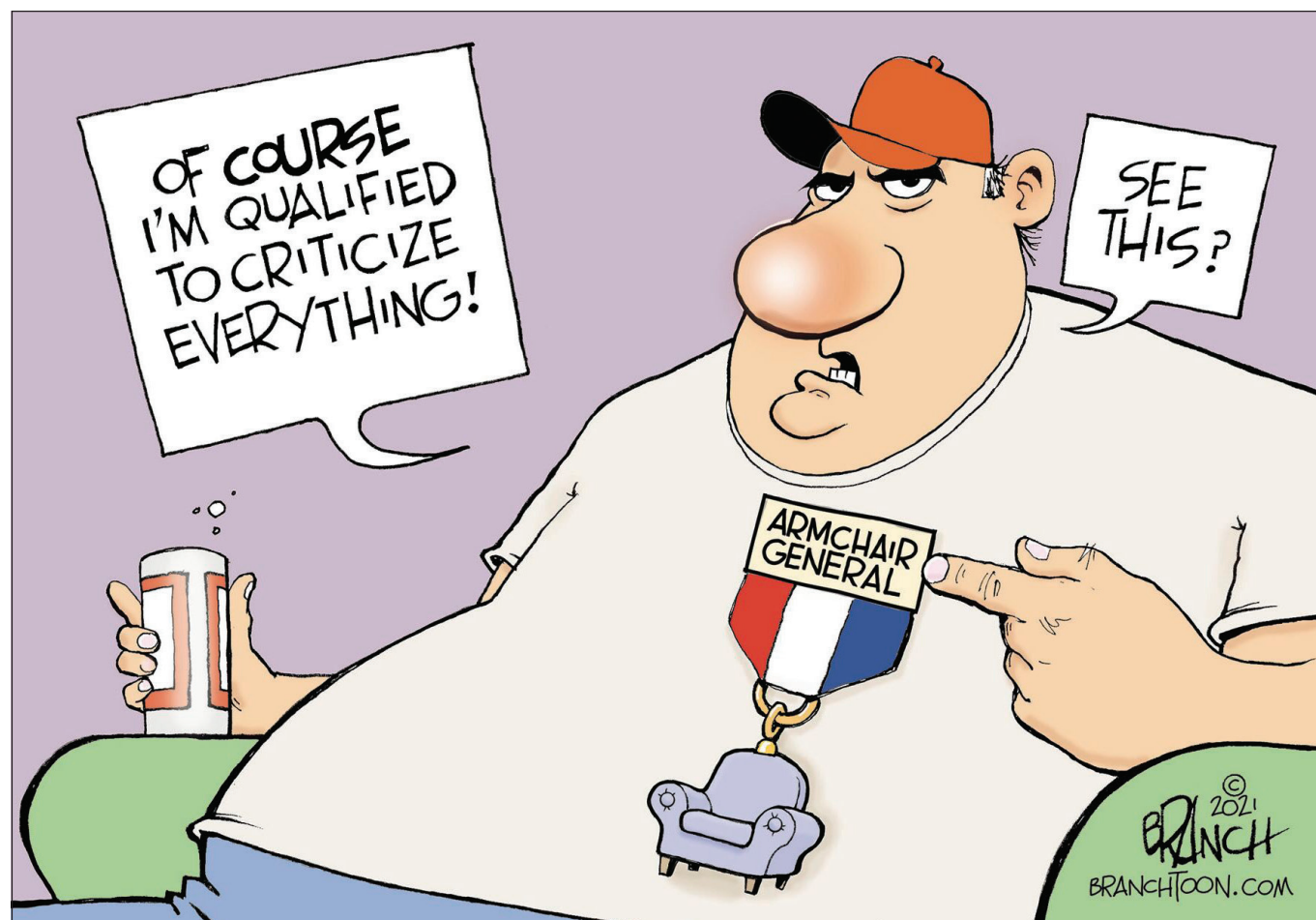
The past 20 years have hardly been deficient in either category. We have endured the losses of some of the best among us in Afghanistan, a direct result from the 9/11 attacks, and in Iraq. We have weathered the worst economic episodes since the Great Depression.

And of course we remain mired in the most severe pandemic in a century.

Yet that September morning remains one of the defining events in America's history, comparable, to cite a few examples within living memory, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, and the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger on Jan. 28, 1986.

Much as the images from those terrible days have become ingrained in our national memory, so too have the incomparable scenes of those two great towers, landmarks in our biggest city, ablaze and eventually crumbling.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Who really pays federal taxes?

By JARED DILLIAN

The Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center recently released a report saying that 61% of U.S. households had paid no federal income tax in 2020, up from 44% in 2019, as the pandemic led to high unemployment and loss of income. Although the number will likely revert to the mid-40% range over time, now is probably a good time to have a discussion about what the right percentage of people paying taxes should be.

But first, it's always good to point out that while about half of Americans don't pay income taxes, almost everyone who is employed pays payroll taxes of some sort in the form of the 6.2% that is withheld from the first \$142,800 of income. It's important to draw the distinction between income taxes and payroll taxes. Philosophically speaking, payroll taxes are intended to fund one's own social security. Income taxes are intended to fund government spending, which has been increasing every year. The burden of funding the government falls on a smaller number of taxpayers. The top 20% of taxpayers paid 78% of federal income taxes in 2020, up from 68% in 2019, according to the Tax Policy Center.

What is the right number of people who should be exempt from paying income taxes? Most reasonable people should agree that number is far less than 61%. A household in the 61st percentile of income makes just under \$90,000 a year. Almost nobody would

consider a household income of \$90,000 as affluent, but there is plenty of room to contribute. Consider that the median household income is \$68,400, and that Bureau of Labor Statistics data from 2017 show that a typical household with \$73,500 in pre-tax income has over \$6,000 in savings and over \$3,000 in entertainment expenses.

Except for the truly indigent, which I would characterize as households making less than \$28,000 a year, we can all chip in. The idea of someone paying no income taxes is offensive to us all, no matter what their wealth and income. They don't have to pay the same amount in percentage terms, but everyone should have a small financial stake in being a U.S. citizen. It's what's called "having skin in the game."

This has very little to do with revenue generation (although if the government really was interested in raising more revenue, it would be easier to do it with the middle class than with the rich). It's the principle that very little is asked of U.S. citizens in terms of participating in civic society. There is no military draft or compulsory service. Voting is not mandatory. All we should ask is that we all do our part and contribute a small amount to the cost of running the government. If people did, they might feel differently about its size and scope. Think of it as Homeowners Association, or HOA dues — nobody likes paying them, but we do.

From a political standpoint, getting everyone with a household income above \$28,000 to pay their fair share of taxes would be very difficult to accomplish. It is political suicide to even suggest raising taxes on the poor or middle class. And people have different ideas of fairness. Some think it is unfair that the wealthy pay preferential rates on capital gains and dividends (we lowered those taxes years ago, for good reason). I happen to think it is unfair that 61% of Americans have no income tax liability. Whether you think it's fair or not probably depends where you sit on the political spectrum.

Global leaders are currently having discussions about implementing a minimum tax rate of 15% for corporations. Why not a minimum tax rate for individuals? It doesn't have to be much — even 5% would do. When you have a financial stake in something, you tend to care more about what happens to that thing. A small contribution would cause people to be much more concerned about how money is spent in D.C., which would be a good thing.

The next time you hear someone tell you with great indignation that they're a taxpayer, remember that there's a 61% chance that they are lying.

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High school gym + loud teen boys = normal

The boys were high school boys, a distinctive subspecies, and one inclined to moderately obnoxious, but generally good-natured, behavior.

Especially when they're in a pack, a situation which, in boys as in, say, hyenas, tends to suppress individual attitudes and encourage group action.

This bunch fulfilled that role with enthusiasm.

I was in a place new to me — sitting on the blue plastic bleachers in the gym at McCall-Donnelly High School in McCall, Idaho.

My vertebrae, which tolerate the torture of flat plastic benches with a bit less equanimity during each successive ordeal, grew increasingly stiff as the afternoon progressed.

I was there, me and my abused backbone, with my wife, Lisa, and our son, Max. We were there to watch my daughter, Olivia, who's a freshman at Baker, play volleyball.

The gym was relatively tranquil during Olivia's JV match.

But in the intermission prior to the start of the varsity match, the student section began to fill in, with a couple dozen Vandals supporters, most of them male, taking up the first few rows near the net.

Before the first serve, a school official recited over the PA system a reminder about sportsmanship. The wording was somewhat different



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from what Oregon high schools use but the message to fans was the same — be respectful of everyone, players, coaches, even referees.

(This pregame ritual insinuated itself into high school sports some time during what seems to me now the inconceivably long span of years that have elapsed since I got my own diploma. I am no doubt misled slightly by nostalgia, that consummate conniver, but as I recall it, in my youth such announcements were deemed unnecessary, the assumption being that the spectators were capable of dealing with untoward behavior themselves, should that be necessary. As it sometimes was. And as they sometimes did.)

I had chosen, for no particular reason, to sit near the net. This put us pretty near what became the Vandals' cheering section.

As the varsity match moved through its first set, I noticed that the students, after gobbling the sandwiches, chicken strips and other food most of them had brought (I was tempted to ask where they bought the sandwiches, which looked pretty scrumptious to me),

began to focus more on what was happening on the court below.

Also they started chanting.

Much of this was as indecipherable to me as much of the music recorded over the past couple decades. The slogans must have been part of a school tradition, as none of the students seemed to struggle to get the words right.

But then a couple of the boys started uttering a sort of yelp/scream hybrid right at the moment the Baker player was poised to serve.

This struck me as a rather blatant disregard for the sportsmanship policy, which included an admonition to not, in effect, hassle (a more bureaucratic phrase was used) individual players, coaches or officials.

A few minutes later I noticed that the school official who had read the policy was talking with the lead referee, on the other side of the gym from where we (and the boys) were sitting. After a brief conference the official started walking in our direction.

I whispered to Lisa that he was going to remind the boys about what the school considered proper behavior.

I couldn't hear clearly what he said, over the squeak of sneakers on hardwood and the cheers, but the official was smiling during his short

speech. I gathered that the essence of his message was that the boys should have fun, and make plenty of noise if they liked, but to ensure their decibels were directed at backing the Vandals and not harassing the Bulldogs.

The boys mostly complied.

I heard a couple of pre-serve yelps — albeit quieter yelps.

But most of the noise echoed from the rafters during the many exciting rallies or after the Vandals had scored a point on their way to a 3-0 sweep.

I haven't spent much time in high school gyms over the past year and a half.

Most of us have had the same experience.

And so I was happy to spend a few hours in a situation that, before I had ever read the word "coronavirus," was so normal as to be unremarkable.

These days, anything normal is sort of remarkable — a reminder that life as we once knew it has continued despite the incredible upheavals we have endured since March 2020.

I had a similar experience several days later in the Union High School gym, a wonderful example of 1950s construction that I had somehow managed not to visit.

With its glossy polished wood

bleachers — complete with back rests that my vertebrae were smitten with — its steep steps that make current building codes seem draconian, and its slightly frayed but still jubilant banner celebrating the Bobcats' multiple state titles in 1949, the UHS gym is a gem.

As we walked out into the slight chill of the early September dusk after Olivia's volleyball match, I imagined the winter evenings in distant decades when fans clomped through the snow to watch their basketball teams play. I heard the phantom rumble that surely would have been audible from outside. I thought of them in their heavy coats, little clouds of condensation in their wake as they walked to their cars in the frigid twilight after the final buzzer, replaying the key shots and rebounds and steals while they were fresh.

I relished something as simple as sitting in a gym and watching kids play a game.

And I appreciated that a pandemic, for all the havoc it can wreak, is incapable of suppressing the enthusiasm of teenage boys, fueled by sandwiches and heavily sugared drinks served in cups large enough to water cattle.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.