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COMMENTARY/**Chester E. Smolski**

How goes the American dream?

Americans are a hard-working lot. The ambitious American worker has fewer holidays, less vacation time and other benefits than Western Europeans.

They are well-rewarded for their pursuit of the American dream. Home ownership rates in this country are among the highest in the world. The typical American worker has more cars and more kitchen gadgets, electronic hardware, recreational gear and computers in his home than any other worker in the world.

But this recession has made people realize how vulnerable they are to the vagaries of the economy and to the potential loss of jobs and materials acquired. Middle-class America is having a difficult time in this economic downturn, but this same decline has not been felt by those well-paid individuals who saw their tax rates drop over the past 12 years and who continue to receive wages that can only be described as obscene.

Professional athletes, the newest members of the entertainment industry, immediately come to mind. Baseball players average over $1 million for playing at their jobs for seven months of the year. The planned addition of two more teams this year means that more .225 hitters and 6-and-10 relief pitchers also will reach that salary level.

A Chicago reporter provides an example of how ludicrous salaries have become. Greg Maddux, age 26, will be getting $32 million over the next five years. At the end of that time, after taxes and with the help of a financial planner, he can retire with $18 million in the bank which he can pass on to his heirs, a monthly income of nearly $100,000 for the rest of his life, a substantial baseball pension at the age of 45 and, of course, his Social Security pension at age 62.

Then there are the business executives. Not only was the late Steven J. Ross of Time Warner among the highest-paid executives in the country, but his heirs will receive $30 million over the next three years because his contract requires the company to pay Ross' heirs his salary and bonus for three years after his death!

We can find similar levels of payment in local publicly and privately owned companies. But it was the parting words of Beverly F. Dolan, the recently retired head of Providence-based Textron, that really rankled those of us who labor in the vineyards, who in a lifetime of work will never receive a *total* compensation of $1 million.

In expressing his concern that tax rates under the new president will go to 36 percent, this $3 million-a-year man told the Providence Journal, "Apparently the American dream stops when you make over $200,000 a year, which is sort of a new twist."

Economists can argue that higher taxes on the rich can reduce investments in the economy, but someone ought to listen to those who speak out for the human concerns of the poor. One way to help is to take a bigger bite out of the rich and less from the working poor.

So when a former Textron chairman suggests that $200,000 annually is some type of disincentive for those reaching for the top, it reflects a lack of understanding for the needs of the working man and woman in this country and an attempt to protect even greater monetary awards for the already well-paid executive.

This lack of understanding by many of these executives was well-illustrated in that infamous trip to Japan last year by the president and the heads of the major American auto makers.

While these executives complained about the low cost of labor in Japan, they made little mention of the fact that their counterparts in the leading auto companies of Japan make no more than 16 times that of the average worker. The American auto CEO, by comparison, makes as much as 160 times that of his average worker.

Already, the new administration in Washington has demonstrated a concern for the cities and the poor, and has said that the wealthy ought to make a bigger contribution through higher taxes. The increasing numbers of too-well paid entertainers, executives and a host of others whose wages have reached obscene levels certainly justify these increased taxes.

And a reminder to the new chairman at Textron: One reason that Minneapolis does so well as a city in terms of a rich cultural life, fewer social problems and a better economy is because a large number of major executives contribute 5 percent of company profits for the betterment of the city. It would be nice if Textron, a locally founded and Providence-based Fortune 500 company, would take the lead to do the same.

The Japanese claim that profits should not go to satisfy the greed of individuals; rather, they should be used for the betterment of society. Well-paid American individuals and profitable corporations should consider this Japanese policy and philosophy when their tax rates go up.

Chester Smolski is professor of geography and director of urban studies at Rhode Island College.

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