Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

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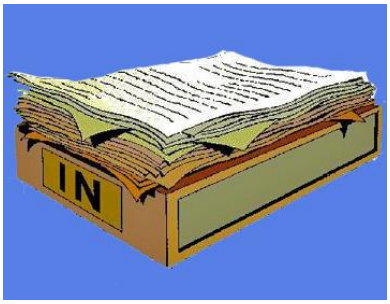

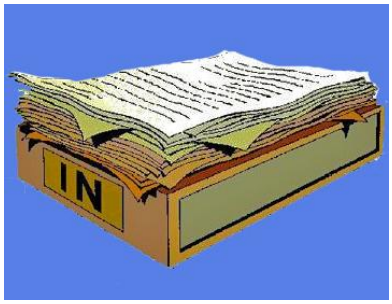

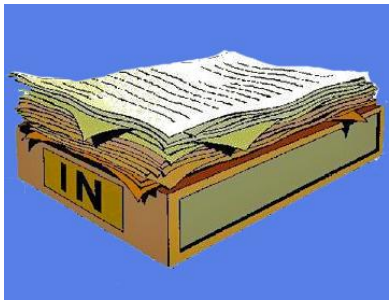

Disclaimer: The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed, but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet, and if they are, they may require registration or subscription to access. Some of the articles being commented on are syndicated, therefore, they may also have appeared in other publications.

22 February 2013

Editor, Washington Post
1150 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

Peter Whoriskey writes that "the White House argues that 'modestly' raising the pay rate will not stall the jobs recovery. 'A range of economic studies show that modestly raising the minimum wage increases earnings and reduces poverty without jeopardizing employment,' according to the White House press office" ("Wal-Mart holds back on minimum wage proposal - so far," Feb. 21).

Overlooking the fact that there's also a range (and quite a sizable one, at that) of economic studies showing that modestly raising the minimum wage does indeed jeopardize the employment options of low-paid workers, I have a question for anyone who believes that a nearly 25-percent hike in the minimum wage will not harm low-paid workers. Suppose the government were to mandate, not an hourly minimum wage, but, instead, an hourly minimum break time. Specifically, suppose Uncle Sam were to oblige employers to force each worker earning less than $9.00 per hour to take at least 15 minutes of break time each and every hour. Is it plausible that employers would continue to pay their low-wage workers for 45 minutes of work per hour the same wage that these employers paid for 60 minutes of work per hour?

Does anyone seriously doubt that employers would respond to this mandate by reducing these workers' hourly pay, by replacing many of these low-skilled workers with machines, by working these employees 33 percent harder or faster, or by otherwise adjusting to the higher costs imposed by a mandated minimum break time in ways that reduce the employment options and benefits available to low-paid workers?

Assuming that everyone of sense sees that a mandated minimum break time would prompt employers to adjust in ways detrimental to low-skilled workers, why do so many people of sense deny the reality that a mandated minimum wage – which is nearly the same beast as a mandated minimum break time – prompts the very same sort of adjustments by employers?

Sincerely,
Donald J. Boudreaux

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and
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27 February 2013

Editor, Washington Post
1150 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

Harold Meyerson writes that Herbert Hoover "cut spending" in order to bring the government's budget "into balance" ("Sequestration stupidity," Feb. 27). Mr. Meyerson is spectacularly wrong on both counts.

U.S. government spending rose during every year of Hoover's administration. In 1932, Hoover's last full year in office, nominal spending was 52 percent higher than it was in 1929, the year he took office.* Given that these years were ones of deflation, the increase in real spending was even larger. And as for balancing the budget, by 1932 Uncle Sam's budget deficit, at $2.7 billion, was 4 percent of GDP - then the third-largest budget deficit in U.S. history.**

Fiction is not made into fact by incessant repetition.

Sincerely,
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3 March 2013

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

Dear Editor:

A. Scott Berg finds inspiration in the U.S. presidency of Woodrow Wilson ("Wilson to Obama: March Forth!" March 3). I'm more disposed to trust the assessment of Wilson offered in 1921 by one of his close observers, H.L. Mencken, who wrote that Wilson's skill lay in "reducing all the difficulties of the hour to a few sonorous and unintelligible phrases."

Mencken went on. Wilson offered only "the sough of vague and comforting words - words cast into phrases made familiar [to the populace] by the whooping of their customary political and ecclesiastical rabble-rousers, and by the highfalutin style of the newspapers that they read. Woodrow knew how to conjure up such words. He knew how to make them glow, and weep. He wasted no time upon the heads of his dupes, but aimed directly at their ears, diaphragms and hearts.

"But reading his speeches in cold blood offers a curious experience. It is difficult to believe that even idiots ever succumbed to such transparent contradictions, to such gaudy processions of mere counter-words, to so vast and obvious a nonsensicality."*

Sincerely,
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8 March 2013

Editor, Washington Times

Dear Editor:

Pres. Obama cancelled public tours of the White House in response to sequestration cuts ("White House visitors, get lost," March 8). Before doing so, I wonder if the president consulted with Alan Krueger, chairman of his Council of Economic Advisors.

Mr. Krueger argues (along with some other economists) that a modest hike in the minimum wage causes no increase in unemployment, in part because firms respond to the higher wage by using greater resourcefulness in working their low-wage employees. More generally, as Mr. Krueger said last month in a PBS interview, "employers might also discover some ways of saving waste that they had before when the minimum wage increases."* Mr. Krueger's presumption is that firms operate with enough 'slack' to permit them to absorb minor hikes in their wage bill without changing their procedures.

But if private firms can easily and without any negative effects adjust to a small, government-imposed tightening of their budgets, why cannot government agencies do the same?

Perhaps, after all, political cynics are correct that heads of government agencies are both less resourceful and less responsive to their customers than are private business people.

Sincerely,
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* "The Man and the Thinking Behind the Minimum Wage Hike," PBS News Hour, February 14, 2013:
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/02/president-obama-is-pushing-a.html

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