
ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

(which stood at \$141.7 billion as of August 1987), Jackson retorts that the red ink is "a spending problem, not a revenue problem." Between 1981 and 1986, national revenues rose by 11 percent—yet federal spending increased by 24 percent.

Yet, Jackson asks, "has it become the conventional wisdom that low taxes are the key to economic vitality?" His unhappy conclusion: Almost certainly not. "The forces of statism and zero-sum thinking gather daily like dark clouds over Washington, and we may well be in for a downpour of new taxes as soon as Reagan leaves office."

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Defining Old Age

"How Old is 'Old Age?'" by Peter Uhlenberg, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 1987), 10 East 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

The 65th birthday is, for most Americans, the threshold where middle age ends and old age begins. Medicare and Social Security begin paying full benefits at age 65, and statisticians routinely define "older Americans" as people over that age.

"Why does one's relationship to an employer and to the welfare state tend to change around age 65?" asks Uhlenberg, associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The answer is that New Deal social planners "simply selected a chronological age" as a dividing line for determining who received federal old age benefits, including Social Security. The age they selected, 65, gradually became, through force of custom and law, the "semi-official" definition of old age.

But the nation's demography has changed during the 52 years since the Social Security Act first mandated federal benefits for those over 65. The proportion of Americans who are 65 years and older has risen from 6.8 percent in 1940 to 12 percent in 1984. As the ranks of older citizens drawing retirement checks grow, so does the burden on younger Americans whose payroll taxes finance the program. Currently 30 percent (or \$318 billion) of the federal budget goes to programs benefiting the elderly; if Social Security were to remain unchanged, says Uhlenberg, 60 percent of the federal budget would be spent on the elderly by 2030.

The 65th birthday, Uhlenberg argues, is "an obsolete standard" for determining old age. Indeed, Congress in 1983 acted to raise (over the next 40 years) to 67 the age at which full Social Security benefits begin, and to encourage people to work as late as 70, now the earliest mandatory retirement age for federal employees and most private-industry workers. Retirement at 65 deprives many of the opportunity to remain productive. Moreover, while the proportion of old people who are poor fell from 25 percent in 1970 to 12 percent in 1984, that of children who are poor rose from 14 percent to 20 percent. Raising the age when Social Security benefits begin could free scarce funds to aid needy children.

Uhlenberg suggests that old age should "become a variable determined by future demographic trends." Calculated as the last one-fourth of

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an average adult life, beginning at age 20, for example, old age could, by 2030, begin officially between the ages of 72 and 75. Such a change, he argues, would reduce federal spending but still allow Americans many years in the "privileged status" of old age.

Forgetting the Past

"Tot Sociology: Or What Happened to History in the Grade Schools" by Diane Ravitch, in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1987), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

History is not taught in most of America's public elementary schools. Children in first through third grades learn about their schools, families, and communities; they do not study the past.

Why has social studies largely replaced history in the primary grades? The answer, says Ravitch, a historian and educator at Teachers College, Columbia University, lies in debates about elementary education conducted more than 50 years ago.

Before the 1930s, most elementary school students studied the past by reading stories about "the heroes of legend and history," from Moses and Ulysses to Peter the Great and Florence Nightingale. These stories were not only full of "romance and adventure," they also prepared students for more serious studies of history and literature in their later years.

Progressive educational reformers, led by philosopher John Dewey,



The way it was in American classrooms: Elementary school students in Washington, D.C., circa 1899, being taught about the arrival of the Pilgrims.