



# Facing The Other Cliffs

BY ROBERT B. REICH  
Tribune Media Services

The “fiscal cliff” isn’t nearly the biggest cliff we face — if we’re talking about dangerous precipices looming on the horizon. Here are three:

### THE CHILD POVERTY CLIFF

A staggering number of our children are impoverished. Between 2007 and 2011, the percentage of American school-age children living in poor households grew from 17 percent to 21 percent.

Last year, according to the Agriculture Department, nearly 1 in 4 young children lived in a family that had difficulty affording sufficient food at some point in the year.

Yet federal programs to help children and lower-income families — such as food stamps, federal aid for poor school districts, Pell grants, child health care, subsidized lunches, child nutrition, prenatal and postnatal care, Head Start and Medicaid — are being targeted for cuts by deficit hawks who insist we can no longer afford them.

It seems as if no one in Washington is any longer talking about reducing poverty in America. All we hear from both parties is the importance of preserving the middle class.

The states, meanwhile, have been laying off teachers and social workers, ending preschool and after-school programs, and cutting local family services. Twenty-three states reduced spending on education this year, much of it on poor schools.

Yet unless we focus on better schools, better health, and improved conditions for these poor kids and their families, America will soon have a significant population of under-educated and desperate adults.

### THE BABY BOOMER HEALTH-CARE CLIFF

Health-care costs already take 18 percent of our entire economy, and we’re soon approaching a cliff that will require far more. Between now and 2030, when 76 million boomers join the ranks of the elderly, those costs will soar.

This is the major reason the federal budget deficit is projected to explode in future years — not Medicare and Medicaid but the rising health-care costs underlying these programs.

These costs, in turn, are the result of a mind-bogglingly inefficient system. We’re spending almost two and a half times more on health care per person than any other rich nation, yet the typical American doesn’t live as long as the citizens of those nations, and we have a higher rate of infant mortality.

We spend \$30 billion a year fixing medical errors — the worst rate among advanced countries — largely be-



Robert REICH

cause we keep patient records on computers that can’t share the data. Meanwhile, administrative costs are eating up 15 percent to 30 percent of all health-care spending in the U.S., twice the rate of other rich nations. The money goes mainly into collecting money — doctors and hospitals from insurers, insurers from companies and policy holders.

The Affordable Care Act will reduce these inefficiencies, but not nearly enough.

The president also has to lead the way in using Medicare and Medicaid’s bargaining power over providers to get lower costs and to move from a fee-for-service system to a fee-for-healthy-outcomes system of health care.

But the real health-care cliff can only be avoided if we adopt a single-payer health-care system.

### THE CLIMATE CLIFF

The third big cliff we’re heading toward is climate change. Global emissions of carbon dioxide jumped 3 percent last year and are expected to jump another 2.6 percent this year, according to scientists who are carefully measuring the atmosphere.

This puts the human race perilously close to the tipping point when ice caps irretrievably melt, sea levels rise, and the amount of available cropland in the world becomes dangerously small. Some say we’re already there.

Yet many Republicans (and their financial patrons, such as billionaires Charles and David Koch) continue to deny climate change.

Not even the Obama administration is any longer pushing for a cap-and-trade system to limit carbon emissions, or a carbon tax that would deter excessive use of carbon-based energy.

Yet unless we act to reduce carbon emissions, other major emitters around the world won’t do so on their own. The only binding pact so far is the Kyoto Protocol, which the U.S. never joined. And we took scant leadership at the international climate talks that just concluded in Qatar.

While the so-called “fiscal cliff” could be dangerous, these other three cliffs pose far greater perils.

Yet we seem unable to avoid hurtling over them because American politics is obsessed by the federal budget deficit, paralyzed by ideological fights over the size of government, and overwhelmed by the power of big money.

*Robert B. Reich, Chancellor’s Professor of Public Policy at the University of California and former U.S. Secretary of Labor, is the author of “Beyond Outrage: What has gone wrong with our economy and our democracy, and how to fix it,” a Knopf release now out in paperback.*

## YOUR LETTERS

### Minimum-Wage Thoughts

Charles Snyder, Apple Valley, Minn.

A couple of recent columns published in the *Press & Dakotan* broaching the subject of minimum wages were diametrically opposed. William Kerr (Nov. 1) advocated raising it to \$12 per hour; Michael Freeman (Nov. 23) wants to do away with it. A raise to \$12 an hour, a 65 percent increase, would be extreme, while doing away with it would likewise be extreme. Both proposals are so radical that the chance of either of those schemes coming to fruition is close enough to zero to be nonexistent.

It seems that opinion pieces, no matter the subject matter, are all too often written by people with extremist positions. Might that be because the country has become so polarized with many people reading and listening only to those sources that reinforce their own point of view? And might that in turn have created a shortage of independent thinkers?

As we do have a minimum wage and it is unlikely to be done away with, surely there is a better way to approach it. Mr. Freeman points out that it has been increased 19 times since 1968. But that has been a bumpy ride; for instance, it was raised to \$5.15 in 1997 and not raised again until 2007 to \$5.85. A better approach would be to tie it to something — perhaps as *The Economist* (Nov. 24) advocates, index it to a percentage of the medium wage, which would result in yearly adjustments. Certainly that would be better than to have it periodically subjected to the whims of Washington.

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### The Divide

John Magnuson, Yankton

In the days of shady, pay-for-hire, spin-doctor journalism, it’s difficult to decipher the reality of what is happening in our world today. That’s why it is refreshing to see a factual article in our very own paper about the widening income divide in our state. It’s the same old story of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer (*Press & Dakotan*, Dec. 1).

The report on income inequality in South Dakota, compiled by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, even makes suggestions for reducing disparities. The fact that quality of life is getting worse for many Dakotans really should be more of a political issue not only statewide but also for local governments.

You gotta say this problem squarely points its finger at leadership and the party that has been running this state for so many years. They are squarely to blame since their policy development has led to the problems outlined in this report.

It’s difficult to show a class of people what a problem is when they are myopic and, frankly, uncaring. It’s true that our state has a low unemployment rate, but this is little consolation when wages are so low. It doesn’t help when our governments recruit companies to move to our towns by touting “no unions” and citing the low cost of wages. This, frankly, sets up all the poverty-related problems outlined in this report.

Our politicians need to be more proactive in this matter, or we need to find better representation that really cares and is not bought and paid for. We need new and better leadership in this state.

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# THE PRESS & DAKOTAN

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## OPINION | OUR VIEW

# School Lunches Get To Loosen Up A Bit

Despite one nagging loose thread in the tapestry of this issue, the USDA made the right call last week when it announced it was relaxing the new requirements it had imposed this fall on school lunch programs around the country.

This course correction came about after pleas and criticisms from school officials, students and lawmakers. It was felt that the new regulations were too restricting, creating many problems for schools charged with trying to stretch their lunch dollars as far as they could. The results were also widely disliked by the students, who felt that the meals were too limiting and unappetizing. And some lawmakers made the obligatory “nanny state” grumblings about government overreaching its authority and sticking its nose where it didn’t belong.

The whole concept behind the new regulations was well-intended. A lot of people, even critics of the new guidelines, have said the same thing. With childhood obesity rates having tripled in the last 30 years and with diabetes rates following suit — the *Wall Street Journal* reported in June, for instance, that the cases of type 1 diabetes among U.S. youth had jumped an astonishing 23 percent between 2001-2009 — the USDA’s desire to institute stricter regulations on lunch programs made sense.

However, the new regulations carried a number of unpopular features and problems.

The caloric restrictions were far too limiting for some tastes: Based on guidelines put forth by the Mayo Clinic, elementary school students were limited to 650 calories, middle schoolers maxed out at 800 calories and high school students were limited to 950 calories. Many students complained they weren’t getting enough to eat. Also, not all students burn calories at the same rate. One Yankton school official noted that cross country runners can sometimes burn up to 6,000 calories on the day of a race, meaning that the school lunch was a far cry from what was needed.

The regulations also caused problems for schools, which found themselves suddenly having to conform to new dietary guidelines that put a strain on budgets. Also, these new rules were somewhat vague, meaning that schools sometimes interpreted them differently, which caused considerable confusion.

Criticisms and protests rang out throughout the autumn, until the Ag Department announced last week it was allowing more flexibility with menu options, particularly with meats and grains.

Where the matter goes from here is anyone’s guess, but the USDA seems somewhat responsive to the complaints.

The intent of the new regulations was indeed good, although it was short-sighted and poorly executed. We trust — or at least hope — that this will not be the case going forward, and all sides of this matter can work together to come up with better and more practical options.

There is that aforementioned loose thread that we must note here in closing.

While we’ve heard about the problems that the new lunch regulations created — including, we were told often, that the kids simply were not getting enough to eat — we also encountered more than one comment (from more than one school) that students were throwing a lot of their food away because they didn’t like it. So, there was apparently not enough food but also, apparently, there was a lot of discarded, wasted food.

Here’s the deal: Good nutrition and healthy eating habits require some dedication and, if you will, compromise. It means learning to do with smaller portions and doing without some unhealthy options. It means learning how to make the right eating choices. Whether or not it’s the government’s job to teach those things is open for debate — and perhaps misses the point. Ultimately, it’s up to each of us, and in this issue, it’s up to the students and their families. Look at the statistics on juvenile obesity and diabetes, and then decide how well we’ve been making those choices so far. That should scream out as a guide as to where we should go next.

kmh

## THE VIEWS PAGE

The **PRESS & DAKOTAN** Views page provides a forum for open discussion of issues and interests affecting our readers. Initialed editorials represent the opinion of the writer, but not necessarily that of the **PRESS & DAKOTAN**. Bylined columns represent the view of the author. We welcome letters to the editor on current topics. Questions regarding the Views page should be directed to Kelly Hertz at [views@yankton.net](mailto:views@yankton.net).

## TODAY IN HISTORY

### By The Associated Press

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 12, the 347th day of 2012. There are 19 days left in the year.

**Today’s Highlight in History:** On Dec. 12, 1877, Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

**On this date:** In 1870, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina became the first black lawmaker sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1897, “The Katzenjammer Kids,” the pioneering comic strip created by Rudolph Dirks, made its debut in the *New York Journal*.

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt nominated Oscar Straus to be Secretary of Commerce and Labor; Straus became the first Jewish Cabinet member.

In 1911, Britain’s King George V announced during a visit to India that the capital would be transferred from Calcutta to Delhi.

In 1917, Father Edward Flanagan founded Boys Town outside Omaha, Neb.

In 1925, the first motel — the Motel Inn — opened in San Luis Obispo, Calif.

In 1937, Japanese aircraft sank the U.S. gunboat Panay on China’s Yangtze River. (Japan apologized, and paid \$2.2 million in reparations.)

In 1946, a United Nations committee voted to accept a six-block tract of Manhattan real estate offered as a gift by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to be the site of the U.N.’s headquarters.

In 1963, Kenya gained its independence from Britain.

In 1972, Irwin Allen’s all-star disaster movie “The Poseidon Adventure” was released.

In 1985, 248 American soldiers and eight crew members were killed when an Arrow Air charter crashed after takeoff from Gander, Newfoundland.

In 2000, George W. Bush was transformed into the president-elect as a divided U.S. Supreme Court reversed a state court decision for recounts in Florida’s contested election.

**Ten years ago:** President George W. Bush publicly rebuked Senate Republican leader Trent Lott for his statement that appeared to embrace half-century-old segregationist politics, calling it “offensive” and “wrong.” President Bush named Wall Street investment banker Stephen Friedman to head his National Economic Council,

replacing Lawrence Lindsey, who’d been ousted along with Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill. Actor Nick Nolte pleaded no contest in Malibu, Calif., to one count of driving under the influence of drugs; he was sentenced to three years’ probation.

**Five years ago:** Republican presidential rivals gathered in Johnston, Iowa, called for deep cuts in federal spending in a debate remarkably free of acrimony. President George W. Bush vetoed a second bill that would have expanded government-provided health insurance for children. Three car bombs exploded in the southern Shiite city of Amarah, Iraq, killing at least 25 people and wounding dozens. Ike Turner, the rock pioneer and ex-husband of Tina Turner, died in San Marcos, Calif., at age 76.

**One year ago:** President Barack Obama met at the White House with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki; afterward, the president declared that U.S. troops were leaving Iraq “with honor and with their heads held high.” Bert Schneider, 78, a producer credited with inspiring a “New Hollywood” band of independent filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s, died in Los Angeles.

**Today’s Birthdays:** Former TV host Bob Barker is 89. Former New York City Mayor Edward Koch is 88. Basketball Hall of Famer Bob Pettit is 80. Singer Connie Francis is 75. Singer Dionne Warwick is 72. Rock singer-musician Dickey Betts is 69. Former race car driver Emerson Fittipaldi is 66. Actor Wings Hauser is 65. Actor Bill Nighy is 63. Actor Duane Chase (Film: “The Sound of Music”) is 62. Country singer LaCosta is 62. Gymnast-turned-actress Cathy Rigby is 60. Author Lorna Landvik is 58. Singer-musician Sheila E. is 55. Actress Sheree J. Wilson is 54. Pop singer Daniel O’Donnell is 51. International Tennis Hall of Famer Tracy Austin is 50. Rock musician Eric Schenkman (Spin Doctors) is 49. Rock musician Nicholas Dimichino (Nine Days) is 45. News anchor Maggie Rodriguez is 43. Actress Jennifer Connelly is 42. Actress Madchen Amick is 42. Country singer Hank Williams III is 40. Actress Mayim Bialik is 37. Model Bridget Hall is 35.

**Thought for Today:** “I have never known a man who died from overwork, but many who died from doubt.” — Charles Horace Mayo, American surgeon and co-founder of the Mayo Clinic (1865-1939).

## FROM THE BIBLE

*Which of the two did the will of his father? Matthew 21:31. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis*

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**Published Daily Monday-Saturday**

Periodicals postage paid at Yankton, South Dakota, under the act of March 3, 1979.

Weekly Dakotian established June 6, 1861. Yankton Daily Press and Dakotian established April 26, 1875.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan, 319 Walnut, Yankton, SD 57078.

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