

Chris Edwards stirs up controversy

Federal Employees Grow Fat While Private Workers Tighten Their Belts

In a series of three posts on the Cato@Liberty blog this August, Cato Institute director of tax policy studies Chris Edwards exposed what ought to be obvious to anyone: federal employees are quite well paid. In fact, in total compensation as workers in the private sector, federal employees, on average, earn twice as much. What's more, the gap between government and private workers is growing. In 2000 the average federal civilian compensation was \$76,187, while private sector employees earned \$45,772. In 2008, while those not embraced by the comfortable, recession-proof arms of the federal government have seen their average compensation grow to only \$59,909, federal workers now take home a whopping average of \$119,982.

Edwards's analysis quickly gained much attention in the media, including two editorials in the *Investors Business Daily*, an excerpt in the *Wall Street Journal*, an excerpt in *Forbes*, and a *USA Today* quote. It was the topic of a CNN Lou Dobbs segment and a commentary by talk show host Mark Levin. The blo-



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This cartoon appeared in *USA Today* a week after Chris Edwards's blog post created a flap over federal pay.

gosphere jumped on the story, too, with discussions on *The Economist* (twice), Glenn Reynolds's Instapundit, the *National Review Online* (twice), the *Atlantic*, govexec.com, federaltimes.com, fedsmith.com, and many others. And Edwards's inbox nearly burst with often irate feedback, including one fed-

eral employee who, after attacking Cato's "ivory pedestal," lamented that "capitalism is founded on abuses of labor, and on quasi criminal activity."

All this for simply pointing out that federal employees make more than they'd like you to think.

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Qaeda. Indeed, on September 11 General McChrystal made an admission that I found almost as startling as the admission about drug revenues in the report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He said that there really is no evidence of a significant al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. My response to that was: well, if al Qaeda isn't in Afghanistan, why on Earth are we in Afghanistan? We went there to defeat al Qaeda. If this isn't the arena for al Qaeda anymore, then our mission seems to have no rational purpose whatsoever.

I believe we can develop a strategy for success but have to dial back the concept of victory to something that protects America's core security interests and has a reasonable prospect of success. That means focusing on disrupting and weakening al Qaeda. And note the terms I use. I don't talk about a definitive victory. That's not possible against a shadowy, nonstate terrorist adversary. We're not going to get some kind of surrender ceremony, or a signed document.

Instead, we have to treat the threat posed by al Qaeda as a chronic security problem, but one that can be managed. I tend to get very impatient with people in Washington and in the opinion-shaping sector in America generally, who seem to act as though Islamic terrorists are all 15 feet tall and about to take over the planet. They aren't, and they aren't. The sooner we realize that, the far better strategy we will have.

We need to abandon the counter-narcotics campaign in its entirety. And we need to abandon any notion of a nation-building campaign in Afghanistan. Now what should we be doing? Well, we should be cutting deals with any relevant player, not just acting as though the government in Kabul is the only relevant actor. Not just focusing on trying to create something that has never really existed in Afghanistan: a very powerful central government in control of the whole country backed by a strong national army. We need to be cutting deals with every relevant player who's willing to work with us. That means regional warlords. That means

tribal leaders. That means clan leaders. And yes, it includes trying to work out arrangements with elements of the Taliban that might be willing to try to work with us against al Qaeda. I don't think it is inevitable at all that, even if the Taliban were able to establish control over most of Afghanistan, it would necessarily give shelter again to al Qaeda. Taliban leaders have learned that there is a price to pay for that kind of decision.

We don't need a large military footprint to achieve such modest military goals. Small numbers of CIA and Special Forces personnel, to work with cooperative players, should be sufficient. That means that virtually all U.S. forces can and should be withdrawn over the next 18 months. Escalation, which is the course we're on now, is precisely the wrong strategy. No matter how long we stay, how much money we spend, and how many lives we squander, Afghanistan is never going to become a central Asian version of Arizona. We should stop operating under the delusion that it will.