

*Feeling the Unthinkable*  
*Essays on Social Justice*  
by Donald Gutierrez

Part III - BUSINESS AS USUAL—GREED, RACISM AND GENOCIDE  
**Chapter 29: Attending College Must Be Free Again**  
**(For the Country's Own Good)**

College students sunk deeply in debt due to extremely costly tuition rates represent a grave threat both to America's democracy and to the country's future. A yearly public college debt of \$22,000 is not uncommon. The debts of students going into pre-professional graduate programs are much higher, sometimes amounting to several hundred thousand dollars. Individuals in circumstances preventing prompt repayment to usurious student-loan companies (single parent, loss of job or residence, health-crisis costs) not only get interest added to interest but receive bad credit ratings and endless, badgering calls from collection agencies. (President Barack Obama's Education Reconciliation Act of April 4, 2010 was designed to protect students from predatory lending institutions, but years of using usury against students had already been dangerously contributive to increasing class stratification.)

When I attended the University of California, Berkeley, in the early 1950s, there was no tuition. Something called an "Incidental Fee" (\$35.00 per semester) covered such privileges or needs as use of gym facilities or the campus hospital (as well as free psychiatric services!) and of course a first-rate scholarly library. Course books were relatively inexpensive, and used copies were readily available at local bookstores. Recently, even at a state university like Berkeley, the cost per year for an undergraduate, according to the U. C. Office of the Registrar, is almost \$5,000 a semester (over \$16,000 for a nonresident of the state), while enrolling in Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law costs almost \$18,000 per semester, including living expenses and expensive books.

Although private colleges are far more expensive, even state school fees, such as Berkeley's, have entailed debts that can imprison students financially for years, decades in fact. It is common knowledge that medical students, for example, are going into higher paying specializations rather than becoming general practitioners in order to pay off six-figure college debts, though the nation badly needs GPs. A quick check of other public universities, such as the University of Michigan and City University of New York, reveals similar high tuition rates. In California, moreover, at least twice as much money is utilized towards building and sustaining penal institutions as is directed towards the state's educational needs.

Extreme financial stress on responsible college students is not only unjust, it is dangerous to the country's future. Higher education should be free to all young people who show an aptitude for and aspire to advanced learning and professional or technical training. Society needs doctors, nurses, dentists, teachers, scholars, engineers, lawyers, economists, philosophers, historians, architects, anthropologists, scientists, artists, novelists, poets, and social, political and cultural critics and other experts--now and in the future. If, however, those high college debt hurdles remain, the consequences are obvious and pernicious: For the most part, only youths from wealthy or comfortable families will be able to afford college, especially quality colleges. The result will be not only a class-based educational structure--Yale vs. Flatsburg City College--but the hardening of a class-structured society. The crucial ideal and reality of democratic, egalitarian institutions of higher education open to all who qualify on the basis of intelligence, aspiration and dedication will have dissolved.

Essential to creating a genuine participative democracy is the fundamental obligation of a society to educate as many of its inhabitants as possible in critical and imaginative thinking. Such an education could allow a broad segment of the population, rather than only an elite, to participate significantly in shaping its society. Without this kind of educated populace, a democracy can lurch into a combination of despotisms, from control--overt or covert--by an imperial presidency or the Pentagon and its congressional boosters to the plutocratic totalitarianism of Wall Street.

Though I am a first-generation American of Central American parentage and from an upper lower-class bohemian family, I was able to attend a major university not only because I received two different scholarships, but because, as a state resident, I could attend a school like Berkeley at small cost. One big reason for this was that wealthy Californians paid a sizable, progressive share of property taxes. This changed in 1978 with the California "revolution" brought about by an anti-property-tax activist named Howard Jarvis. Strongly appealing to the rich and to landlords, Jarvis's Proposition 13 cut property taxes by 57 percent and allowed property to be taxed only during a sale, no longer annually.

This "relief" to the state's wealthy made millionaires and multimillionaires even richer, and also had a devastating impact on California's county and city budgets. Consequently, among other things, public libraries in the state were unable to expand and, thus, unable to meet the reading needs and interests--especially among poorer families--of a rapidly enlarging population. University and grade school budgets were also affected, due in part to sizable cuts in state educational budgets as well, which were made by Republican Governor Pete Wilson. And though U. C. Berkeley continues to have full enrollments and high ranking nationally, not everyone who merits attendance can afford to attend. With federal Pell Grants having been reduced almost by half in recent years, the debt burden for many students is further intensified.

Thus, the rich, directly and indirectly, have made their own contribution to class-structured higher education in California (and elsewhere), either in effect closing college gates to many children from families of moderate and low income or seriously burdening those who get into school with preposterously large school debts. Jarvis's Proposition 13, which remains a disaster for the state's public funds, is considered to be a major factor in California's continuing budget crisis.

Americans raging about the costs of health care reforms seldom ask what's happened to the monies needed not only for such reforms but also for a democratic society's future and well-being as embodied in a flourishing, egalitarian higher education system. We would do well to consider by comparison the kind of monies available in selected areas of Wall Street and the military sector.

Extremely wealthy investors contribute millions and billions of dollars to hedge fund managers, who transmit these monies electronically around the world in seconds. People criticizing America's salary culture tend to focus on the huge corporate and banking CEO salaries; and within the context of average wages, these CEO salaries certainly are brutally outsized. Yet, compared to the massive kinds of monies being invested and acquired by extremely rich people and by unregulated "too big to fail" banks, CEO salaries are, as economists like Paul Krugman have observed, merely sideshows. Trillions of dollars are being circulated electronically to make more money. It is fair to point out here that the already-wealthy have reaped more than one trillion dollars in tax cuts provided to their class by former President Bush. The basic issue is that wealth has been structured in our country in such a way that vast sums of money acutely needed and deserved for social, public needs have been privatized. This complex, devious activity has evolved and been ramified in too many ways to describe here, but a crucial factor to mention has been the regressive taxation which, legislated by Congress in recent decades, provided huge tax breaks and subsidies to big corporations and generous interest rates to the big banks.

Thus, enormous sums of money that should be accessible for America's infrastructure--schools, medical health programs and facilities, aid programs to the poor and cultural venues--are pouring into corporation, defense industry, bank and private investor coffers. The most egregious manifestation of this horrific privatization of public monies was the 2008 financial meltdown in which the individuals and financial institutions that devised and profited from deregulated financial dealings were bailed out at enormous public expense but without public consent. This was surely one of the most heinous thefts of public wealth in history.

One institution using massive amounts of public monies with very little critical media attention or evaluation is the Pentagon. A 2010 *Mother Jones* ongoing report entitled "Shock and Audit: The Hidden Defense Budget" suggests that the Pentagon budget is

monstrously large. After being informed that cost overruns for current major weapons programs now are \$296 billion, the report observes that the 2009 budget President Barack Obama requested is almost \$534 billion and that the 2010 Pentagon budget was \$680 billion. Those two annual sums combined would amount to \$1,214 trillion. But that's not all. There is the immense expense of some 725 American military posts spread around the world and the more than 900 bases on our own soil [see review of Chalmers Johnson's *The Sorrows of Empire*, Ch. 27].

As for the cost of a mere selection of warplanes, each (already constructed) F-22 amounted to \$350 million (a grand total of approximately \$65 billion for 78 of them). The F-22 and the F-35 (the Joint Strike Fighter) were reported in *Time* (August 27, 2009) as being merely two of the top ten most expensive American war planes. Finally, as if to fantasize about more ways to spend American taxpayers' money, the Pentagon harbors a high-placed senior officer named Michele A. Flournoy with the formidable title of Under Secretary of Defense for Policy whose job in effect is to conceive and plan new wars. The golden era of peace that was supposed to follow the demise of the Cold War continues to be undermined by Washington's endless lust for wars and the Pentagon's endless demand for more and newer ordnance.

No one can demonstrate that national security demands the expenditure of the mountains of money only partly indicated above. It is well known that the U. S. defense budget is larger than that of all other nations' war budgets combined. Thus, in some essential respects, it would appear that the fundamental interests of the state and the public are polarized. The public is forced to lose its monies through regressive taxation, enormous government-expedited bank bailouts and fear-mongering about terrorism to justify expanding the military budget. This results in the public need--and the public itself--being sacrificed to a centralized policy of imperial power and what the Department of Defense has termed global "full-spectrum-dominance."

So how does the amount of money being spent in just these major categories--the military and the financial corporations--relate to student college costs? Monies going through hedge funds, corporation-taxable monies going instead to off-shore tax havens, monies supporting our two most recent unnecessary and illegal wars (\$3 trillion over the next decade, according to Nobel-Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz), the enormous ordnance and global military base costs and the huge medical care expense for our wounded soldiers--just a moderate portion of this would allow all qualifying young people to attend college free, rather than go to college via military service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Writing in *The Progressive* (2010), the journalist and political science professor Adolph Reed, Jr. urges that education is a right, not a privilege, and that free college education would cost about \$80 billion, which he claims is much less than the 2008 bank bailouts. It is also less than ten percent of the

current Pentagon budget. What better defense against external (or internal) threat can a democratic society possess than a deeply and widely educated citizenry?

In the 1950s the University of California, Berkeley, and other state universities throughout the country, comprised a wonderful exemplification of democracy in a crucial area of our society's promise of an egalitarian future. We are now betraying that promise through a rigidly class-oriented structure of higher education costs and access. If education is not once again democratized as it was for several decades after World War II, the ideal of the United States as an open society of opportunity and advancement for all will be doomed. Monies unjustly and unwisely arrogated by America's financial and military sectors must be returned to essential civilian needs, among which higher education is crucial.

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