

<http://www.utexas.edu/research/pasp/publications/editorials/12feb11.html>**Find this article at:**<http://www.statesman.com/opinion/budget-woes-and-our-misguided-priorities-1248545.htm>**COMMENTARY****Palaima: Budget woes and our misguided priorities****Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR***Austin American-Statesman* Saturday, February 12, 2011

In reviewing a book on imperialism, power and identity in the Roman empire, I had a frequent sense of *déjà vu* derived from reading at the same time about the public values that prevail in our state.

The Roman empire, according to distinguished Roman archaeologist D.J. Mattingly, was characterized by the kinds of steep pyramids of wealth and power that have returned to our country for the first time since Gilded Age capitalists made fortunes from monopolizing markets for railroads, oil, steel, banking, finance, real estate, fur and tobacco.

Mattingly lays bare the “ugliness of imperial exploitation of people” and how easy it was for those with power and wealth to fool even themselves that their methods and policies were benign, civilized and for the common good. Mattingly cites Michel Foucault’s observation that power in the hands of a wealthy elite acts brutally toward those at lower levels, “that there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to gambol in.” What Foucault means is that we live within systems where actions taken and resources misdirected have consequences for everyone.

Consider how easily our elites lavish public money on those in public positions of power. They seem not to care how such decisions affect the resources available to others who are not so fortunate.

What does it mean when in these hard times a Texas Transportation Commission report declares that “erosion of public confidence” could be fixed if only the executive director’s salary were not a “ridiculously low” \$192,500? Are there really no individuals of talent, vision and organizational skills who are dedicated enough to public service that they will try to scrape by on \$16,000 per month?

Likewise, what kind of myopic collective moral conscience raises the salary of a vice chancellor within the Texas State University system over 40 percent in two years, from a mere \$200,000 to nearly \$280,000, and still sees the need to continue his \$360 per year cell phone allowance? This has been done when staff and faculty salaries were frozen for the 2011 budget year.

Gov. Rick Perry, presiding over a looming \$27 billion budget shortfall that is already having severe effects on education at all levels and on other human services, proposes that our state develop a bachelor’s degree that costs no more than \$10,000, including textbooks. That is \$2,500 per year. For sake of comparison, my full-tuition scholarship at Boston College in 1969 was \$2,000; and I am sure I spent another \$250 in textbooks each semester. Meanwhile, the state’s bill for the monthly rent on Perry’s West Austin house is \$9,000 per month.

All this is put in perspective by the \$2 million pay raise given the University of Texas football coach 14 months ago and the \$607,000 increase in salaries that will be paid to his eight assistant coaches in 2011. All together, the assistants will earn more than \$3.6 million, not counting bonuses. UT now costs between \$9,860 and \$11,200 per year. The pay raises for the football coaches since December 2009 could have sent 250 students to our flagship university full time.

Meanwhile, past cuts have taken a toll on UT’s founding purpose to be a university of the first class. In the 2004 international rankings of universities by the Times Higher Education in London, UT was 15th; in 2005, 26th; and by 2009, 76th.

Where was UT in 2010? Last fall, when asked for statistics of the sort UT had provided for six years, its leadership, citing resource constraints imposed by budget cuts, decided not to participate in rankings that are respected and noticed around the world. So UT does not appear in the rankings at all.

We spend more than \$8.5 million on football coaches, but we do not have enough money to provide data to measure how much further we have declined in higher education.

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