

# viewpoint

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# Big questions remain on complex pension plan



**ron littlepage**  
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Well, we've finally seen the numbers. They are huge, and they are complicated. After Mayor Lenny Curry and his team finished presenting their public employee pension reform plan during a City Council workshop Thursday, several council members acted like puppies having their bellies scratched.

Councilman Reggie Gaffney said he was "amazed and stunned" by how good the plan was.

Slow down. There are billions of dollars of sales tax revenue and general fund monies at stake here with much of it being foisted off on future generations. I don't pretend to understand all of the complicated financial and accounting maneuvering that the plan depends on, but it's based on assumptions that could easily turn out to be false.

For example, when the Curry team was selling voters on the idea of approving a new half-cent sales tax that would begin being collected in 2031 with the revenues dedicated solely to paying off the city's pension debt, the team predicted that could happen as early as 2045, thus ending the tax.

During Thursday's presentation, that prediction was moved to five or six years later, which would cost taxpayers \$1.5 billion more. And under the law that established the sales tax, it can be collected until 2061 if the pension debt hasn't been wiped out, costing taxpayers additional billions of dollars.

I have great respect for Sam Mousa, Curry's chief administrative officer, and Mike Weinstein, his chief financial officer, who obviously were key players in putting this plan together.

But the plan needs to be thoroughly scrutinized by outside experts to make sure each ramification is understood.

City Council could end up voting on the plan by the end of this month. But that's just not enough time for a complete study.

While Curry may have his way with City Council, there's a large segment of the public that won't be easy to convince, especially when it comes to the benefits that are included in the package.

That's particularly true for police and firefighters, whose pension fund contributed to a majority of the debt. They have to be smiling like Cheshire cats.

For starters, they will get a 3 percent bonus and then 20 percent in raises spaced over three years.

In pitching the plan, Curry's team played every string on the violin: They noted that police and firefighters hadn't had a raise in nine years.

For those in the private sector who worked through the Great Recession, that's a very familiar tune. But a 23 percent bump in pay is sweet music they aren't likely to hear anytime soon.

If the deal is approved, new hires would be placed in a 401(k)-style retirement plan, which is Curry's main goal.

But all of the current police and firefighters and those hired before the plan would take effect on Oct. 1 would remain in the defined benefit pension plan that

got us into trouble to begin with. And that includes keeping the 3 percent annual COLA for retirees and the guaranteed 8.4 percent return on money in DROP accounts.

Those are the two benefits I hear the most complaints about, and they were reduced in the 2015 pension reform agreement, which this deal supersedes.

And police and firefighters even get a new benefit called a "share plan," which takes money coming from the state that is collected on insurance premiums and can be used to increase benefits for retirees.

Under the 2015 agreement, much of that money was set aside to help pay down the debt. All of this — the benefits, the debt payments — are part of a package that can only be voted up or down by the council.

It may be the best way to go. It may not be.

But before we can arrive at an answer, the question needs to be thoroughly studied.

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## Misinformation has credibility in today's culture



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Impulse control is unfashionable as well as un-presidential, but perhaps you should resist the urge to trip people who stride briskly down the sidewalk fixated on their phone screens, absorbed in texting and feeling entitled to expect others to make way.

New technologies are shaping behaviors and dissolving civilities.

In 2005, Lynne Truss, in her book "Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door," said we were slouching into "an age of social autism."

She foresaw people entertaining themselves with portable technologies that enable "limitless self-absorption."

Truss foresaw an age of "hair-trigger sensitivity."

Some Wellesley College professors said last month that inviting controversial, aka conservative, speakers to campus injures students by forcing them to "invest time and energy in rebutting the speakers' arguments."

In the latest issue of The American Interest, the Hudson Institute's Carolyn Stewart wonders, "What is it about social media that compels us to throw off the gloves?"

Social media's encourages "expectations for a custom-made reality" and indignation about anything "that deviates from our preferences."

The consequences are enumerated in "The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters," written by Tom Nichols.

Our devices and social media are, Nichols says, producing people who confuse "internet grazing" with research and this faux research with higher education.

"It is," Nichols writes, "a new Declaration of Independence: No longer do we hold these truths to be self-evident, we hold all truths to be self-evident, even the ones that aren't true."

In the movie "Animal House," when the fraternity member is asked by a fellow member if he knows what he is doing, he replies, "Take it easy, I'm pre-law."

When someone says, "I thought you were pre-med," he replies, "What's the difference?"

What indeed. In today's culture, thin-skinned people cannot distinguish the phrase "you're wrong" from "you're stupid."

Nichols says there is "a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden" disdain for even the ideal of expertise.

"When you take an elevator to the top of a tall building, the certificate in the elevator does not say 'good luck up there'; it says that a civic authority, relying on engineers educated and examined by other engineers, have looked at that box and know, with as much certainty as anyone can, that you'll be safe."

The "spreading epidemic of misinformation," nowadays known as "alternative facts," gives rise to a corollary to Gresham's Law ("bad money drives out good"): "misinformation pushes aside knowledge."

Nichols recounts an old joke about a British Foreign Office official who retired after 40 years: "Every morning I went to the prime minister and assured him there would be no world war today. And I am pleased to note that in a career of 40 years, I was only wrong twice."

This official deserved an A grade, like everyone else.

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## Another view: Michael Ramirez Creators Syndicate



## Another view: David Fitzsimmons Arizona Daily Star



# Congress needs to vote on military action in Syria

**point of view**  
greg sargent

On Thursday night, President Donald Trump announced that he had ordered the launch of 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian military installation in retaliation for chemical attacks that killed scores of Syrian civilians, including children.

Leading Democrats joined Republicans in expressing support for Trump's move.

But a handful of lawmakers in both parties also demanded that Congress vote on authorization of his action and any future escalation of it — and that Trump come to Congress to request that authorization and explain his refusal to do so thus far.

They're right. Congress must vote on Trump's war. Just ask Trump himself.

In August 2013, when the Obama administration was debating whether to respond militarily to another chemical weapons attack at the time, Trump said: "The president must get congressional approval before attacking Syria — big mistake if he does not!"

Obama did seek congressional authorization, which he did not get, and he ultimately shelved the plan.

Still, Obama's overall record on this front was not good.

As a number of people argued, it was a big failing of Obama's to delay in seeking authorization for the war against ISIS, and his argument that the war on ISIS was justified by Congress' 2001 authorization of retaliation against the 9-11 attacks was absurd. It was also a bipartisan failure on Congress' part not to step up and vote on authorization against ISIS.

But now Trump isn't following his own advice, and some are already criticizing the strikes as illegal.

The Trump administration disagrees.

The Washington Post's Josh Rogin reports that the Trump administration is circulating documents that "invoke Article 2 of the Constitution as its legal justification for the strikes, asserting that the president has the power to defend the U.S. national interest," which includes "promoting regional stability, which the use of chemical weapons threatens."

But regardless, none of this absolves Congress from the obligation to exercise its constitutional duty to vote to authorize military action.

House Speaker Paul Ryan has issued a statement in support of Trump's action that says nothing about any vote, except this: "I look forward to the administration further engaging Congress in this effort." Yeah, and then what?

Will you hold a vote on it?

The strike raises a host of questions about what comes next. Among them: What is the nature and scope of our ultimate goal in Syria? What will constitute "success" on the part of whatever our mission is or turns out to be? Will Trump seek to expand our role in a civil war that seems to only offer horrific options and choices?

Now that Trump's own rationale for the strike is that Syrian civilians have been victimized — last night he alluded to the "beautiful babies" who had been "cruelly murdered" — will he rethink his efforts to ban Syrian refugees?

Americans deserve to see their representatives in Congress hold a full debate and vote on this and any further action. Mere statements don't require any meaningful buy-in, which should be demanded of decisions with such great consequence.

Greg Sargent is a Washington Post columnist.

## King's forgotten twin dream has relevance today



**leonard pitts jr.**  
mclatchy newspapers

This is a column about Martin Luther King Jr.'s other dream.

His most famous dream, of course, is the one he articulated at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963.

It was a vision of racial amity so frightening that people killed to keep it from coming true.

Five decades later, it's so broadly accepted that even those who don't believe in it feel constrained to pretend they do.

But King's other dream is as controversial now as it was back then in 1968.

It was a dream of economic justice wrought by a rainbow coalition of the dispossessed.

King thought about pulling together the poor blacks of the inner cities, the poor American Indians of the reservations, the poor Latinos of the barrios and the poor whites of Appalachia.

If you could get all of these groups to put aside their differences and unite around the meagerness and exploitation they all had in common, you'd have the makings of a movement that would break the old paradigms.

King had in mind a radical transformation. He was thinking of a guaranteed income and a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged.

"True compassion," he wrote, "is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

But King was murdered in Memphis 49 years ago this week, and that other dream was left orphaned. It has been largely forgotten ever since.

So it was welcome news that the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of groups demanding African-American "power, freedom and justice" and the Fight For \$15, a group advocating for worker's rights and a living wage, had joined forces to commemorate the assassination with marches in Memphis and around the country.

We can only hope it is the start of a permanent movement.

### DUPING THE WHITE UNDERCLASS

No one should want that more than the white underclass.

Ever since they waded into cannon fire to protect the right of rich people to own black people, poor white people have, in the aggregate, been victims of the longest con in American history.

They accepted the fool's gold of racial superiority. Yet they could not ask for wages enough to live on for fear those "lazy" blacks and browns would be brought in to do the work for less.

Still, they consoled themselves that they had nothing in common with those "other" poor, even as their schools crumbled, their children's bellies rumbled, their wages stagnated, their buying power deflated and their jobs went away.

Forty-three million Americans live below the poverty line; 28 million of them are white. The black poverty rate is a staggering 24.1 percent.

Meantime, the rich get richer, and a man in the millennial generation has only a 50 percent chance of earning more than his folks did, according to a study by a team of economists led by Stanford professor Raj Chetty.

So a movement combining King's twin dreams would be a welcome and overdue recognition of the obvious.

When it comes to racial and economic justice, the idea that we can fight for the one while ignoring the other is delusional.

If you don't have both, you don't have either.

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