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You gotta love the GOP Congress

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WASHINGTON (Creators Syndicate) -- When a couple of clueless pilots in a two-seater plane breached Washington's "no-fly zone" and Capitol Hill was evacuated, you will be comforted to learn, our congressional leaders were immediately whisked to safety in big, black armored SUVs.

You have to love the priorities of this Congress. More than two years and thousands of American casualties after the Pentagon's broken pledge to keep production lines working until all U.S. forces in Iraq had fully armored vehicles, today -- when one-third of the vehicles Americans use in that country remain, by the military's own standards, inadequately armored -- Republican congressional leaders show their commitment to the nation's brave volunteers overseas by protecting House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, and his fellow patriots on the home front in oversized, fully armored SUVs.

How out-of-touch is this Congress and its leadership? While fewer and fewer private employers provide their workers with medical coverage or pensions and the record number of Americans without health insurance grows beyond 45 million, Congress provides itself with Rolls Royce coverage and pensions that vest after only five years, principally paid for by -- that's right -- their "employers."

But the ultimate act of the GOP Congress' insensitive hypocrisy: While rejecting all attempts since 1996 to increase the \$5.15-an-hour federal minimum wage, the same majority Congress has voted, as Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, publicly reminded his colleagues in floor debate, to accept for themselves seven pay raises totaling \$28,500. Talk about gall!

If compassionate conservatism really means anything beyond sloganeering, the Republican Congress -- which happily accepts cost-of-living increases in its own paychecks -- would preserve the limited purchasing power of the lowest-paid and often hardest-working Americans by indexing the minimum wage to be increased periodically to reflect changes in the cost-of-living or the average hourly industrial wage.

Today, without indexing, the real value of the minimum wage is not \$5.15 an hour, but rather \$4.37 an hour. To restore the purchasing power of the minimum wage to what it was in 1968 would require an increase to \$8.70 an hour.

But doesn't raising the minimum wage cost jobs by pricing the lowest-paid workers out of the market? If that were the case, how do we explain the extraordinary job increase in the four years following the most recent increase in the minimum wage, when more than 11 million new jobs were created at a remarkable pace of 232,000 every month.

The most unforgettable of all the numbers is this: Working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year at the minimum wage means a total income of \$10,712 for the year, which is more than \$5,000 below the government's poverty line for a family of three.

Aren't minimum-wage earners basically upper-middle-class high-school kids who work to supplement their allowances? Just three out of 10 of those earning the minimum wage are youths. Seventy percent of minimum-wage earners are adults ages 20 or older.

More than three out of five are women, the great majority of whom have children.

In the 1960s, the federal minimum wage was generally over 52 percent of the nation's average hourly earnings. Today, when the most recent average earning is \$16 an hour, the paltry \$5.15 federal minimum wage amounts to less than one-third of that.

Poverty among men and women working full-time all year has doubled in the last 30 years. Since Jan. 20, 2001, the number of Americans in poverty has increased by more than 4.3 million.

Today, of the 36 million of us living in poverty, 13 million are children. An unjustly low minimum wage has exacerbated the problem and the human misery. If we truly do value work, we could -- in between tax breaks for the "Investor Class" -- prove it by valuing the people who do the critically important work of taking care of our children and caring for our elderly, and raise the federal minimum wage to \$7.50 an hour.

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