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## OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Going Home, to Red Ink and Blues

By **NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF****Y**AMHILL, Ore.

Across the nation, state and local leaders have been forced to slash more than \$100 billion in spending, laying off thousands of employees, cutting off health insurance for roughly one million people, and lowering America's standard of living. Washington is not just aloof from the pain out here in real America, but is making matters worse.

People across America will pay the price for Washington's indifference in lower-quality schools, fewer chances to go to college, less police protection and diminished medical care. The unlucky ones among us, like Douglas Schmidt, will never recover. A 37-year-old epileptic, he depended on drugs that cost \$13 a day and were paid for by the state. State budget cuts meant he lost that benefit, and he ran out of pills in late February.

A week later, he had a severe seizure, his heart stopped, and he suffered permanent brain damage, leaving him in what doctors called a "persistent vegetative state."

"He's very impaired," said his domestic partner, Werth Sargent. "He can't talk. He does not respond to commands. But his eyes do move, and they do constrict when light shines in his pupils. That's on his better days."

The bills so far for treating Mr. Schmidt? About half a million dollars, borne by taxpayers.

When Arthur Schlesinger wrote his "Age of Roosevelt" history books about the Great Depression, his work emphasized that history is not just what Washington decides but also what Main Street endures. While this is no Depression, I came to measure the impact of the fiscal crisis in this little farm town of Yamhill, Ore., population 970. I chose Yamhill not because it is unusually traumatized but because it is a place I know and love — it's where I grew up.

The schools here were not forced to close early, as in nearby Hillsboro, and as one drives through Yamhill on Maple Street, from one end of town to the other past the single flashing yellow light, there aren't any signs of economic distress. Yamhill even has a new business — a used car lot, with four cars for sale. But still, there is a real, measurable drop in the quality of life here.

The schools in Yamhill have had to lay off teachers, a bitter and divisive process in a small town like this, so classes — which averaged 20 students last year — will be significantly bigger this year. At the high school, the average class in the fall will have 29 students, and there could be 40 in English classes.

"We'll only have two English teachers in the high school," frets the schools superintendent, Dennis Hickey. "We need at least four. I don't know how we're going to do it."

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In the 1970's, Yamhill offered not just Spanish but also French (the teacher didn't really speak French but was a good sport and gamely agreed to teach by staying a couple of chapters ahead of us). Next year, Yamhill will be down to just Spanish, and many would-be Spanish students will be turned away.

"We still have a librarian," Mr. Hickey said brightly. "Some schools don't have that any more."

Oregon has been proud of its schools, and it has ranked among the top states in SAT scores. But schools have been hit particularly hard, and universities have been gutted.

"It's very scary," said Mary Stern, a county commissioner. "I have a 4 1/2-year-old, and I'm petrified about what might happen in the schools."

The county commissioners have been forced to slash programs for teenage mothers, mental health, prenatal care, drug abuse. The county jail's drug program was very successful, but it was dropped — how could the county help criminals when it cut help for teenage mothers?

A man indicted for stealing and fencing hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of property locally was recently detained in Missouri, but Oregon couldn't pay to bring him back for trial — so he was freed. In Yamhill's old football rival, the nearby town of Dayton, the entire police department has been eliminated.

The hub of Oregon is Portland, a gem of a city that has always felt very safe. But Mark Kroeker, the police chief, worries that word is getting out to criminals that because of four consecutive years of police budget cuts, crime pays in Portland.

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Police are sometimes forced to issue citations — like traffic tickets — to car thieves and burglars because there is no room in the jail, Chief Kroeker says. He adds that one result is that auto theft is up 17 percent so far this year. "We run a serious risk of erosion of our quality of life," Mr. Kroeker said.

The economy has been in worse shape before in Oregon — the recession in the early 80's devastated the timber towns — but the budget problems seem more intractable now than they've been in living memory. The state government is so paralyzed that it still hasn't approved a budget for the fiscal year that began July 1.

Future Farmers of America (now the FFA), which dominated my high school life and taught me more than any class, and remains a pillar of rural America, may now be dismantled at the state level. The traditional county fair, where the Yamhill FFA and 4-H kids show hogs and sheep against one another and their parents compete for blue ribbons for the best berry pie, is in jeopardy because the county isn't able to rescue it if it goes in the red.

What's growing in Oregon is anger.

"This woman was saying to me, People should be on the streets with pitchforks, saying: `Revolt! Revolt!' " said Ms. Stern, the county commissioner. "There's a groundswell starting. I can feel this energy coming."

Will this fury be directed at President Bush in the next election? I'm not sure. People here complain vigorously about state or local officials, but Mr. Bush seems an afterthought. Still, when the topic comes up, many people are scathing about the Bush administration's spending \$4 billion a month in Iraq while letting small towns beg for scraps.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski, a Democrat, thinks that President Bush will have to bail out the states next year.

"There's a presidential election coming up," he said in an Oregon-style interview — sitting outside in his shirt sleeves on a bench in a public park. "And when the administration feels the hot breath of the public on its neck, they're going to appropriate more resources to the states."

Mr. Kulongoski says that when he and other governors get together, they wonder: What can Washington be thinking?

President Bush is not primarily to blame for this fiscal crisis. The causes include overly enthusiastic spending during the boom years as well as the popping of the tech bubble. But Mr. Bush is making things worse with his fiscal recklessness and his practice of forcing states and school districts to spend money on new programs without helping to pay the bill. Washington should be

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lending a hand, not adding to the local burden — showing all the compassion of Marie Antoinette.

If the budget crisis persists, and it is likely to so long as Washington is distracted and unhelpful, towns like Yamhill will lose some of their heart and vitality. And the victims of the budget cuts, like Douglas Schmidt, may never recover. At best, Mr. Schmidt will linger unconscious for decades, breathing through his respirator, costing taxpayers millions of dollars, a monument to America's fiscal crisis of 2003.

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