

trust? What will that do to American productivity in the long run, in terms of creativity and commitment? And what of the “social contract” between government and the citizen? Is that at risk as well?

At some level we all know the answers. We understand, for instance, that a salary alone will not motivate people to risk their lives. Police officers, firefighters, soldiers—they don’t die for their weekly pay. It’s the social norms—pride in their profession and a sense of duty—that will motivate them to give up their lives and health. A friend of mine in Miami once accompanied a U.S. customs agent on a patrol of the offshore waters. The agent carried an assault rifle and could certainly have pounded several holes into a fleeing drug boat. But had he ever done so? No way, he replied. He wasn’t about to get himself killed for the government salary he received. In fact, he confided, his group had an unspoken agreement with the drug couriers: the feds wouldn’t fire if the drug dealers didn’t fire. Perhaps that’s why we rarely (if ever) hear about gun battles on the edges of America’s “war on drugs.”

How could we change this situation? First, we could make the federal salary so good that the customs agent would be willing to risk his life for it. But how much money is that? Compensation equal to what the typical drug trafficker gets for racing a boat from the Bahamas to Miami? Alternatively, we could elevate the social norm, making the officer feel that his mission is worth more than his base pay—that we honor him (as we honor our police and firefighters) for a job which not only stabilizes the structure of society but also saves our kids from all kinds of dangers. That would take some inspirational leadership, of course, but it could be done.

Let me describe how that same thought applies to the world of education. I recently joined a federal committee on