United States v. Hatter and the Taxation of Federal Judges

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TAXATION, COMPENSATION, AND JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE: HATTER v. UNITED STATES

By Jonathan L. Entin and Erik M. Jensen

Some issues just won’t go away. Can federal judges be subject to a federal income or wage tax that affects them in the same way it affects other American taxpayers? Despite early authority to the contrary — the Supreme Court, in a 1920 decision, Evans v. Gore, struck down extension of the national income tax to federal judges — most commentators used to think the answer was unquestionably Yes. To be sure, the Constitution’s Compensation Clause provides that federal judges “shall, at stated Times, receive for their Services, a Compensation, which shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office,” but a generally applicable federal tax simply treats judges like anyone else.

So much for apparently settled doctrine. In Hatter v. United States, a case that has been bouncing up and down in the federal judicial system for more than a decade, the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit held that bringing the federal judiciary into the social security system, and thus imposing the social security wage tax on judges who had previously been exempt from the tax, violated the Compensation Clause. The Supreme Court granted certiorari in Hatter.

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1253 U.S. 245 (1920).
2U.S. Const. art. III, section 1 (emphasis added).
3Hatter now involves eight reported decisions: (1) 21 Cl. 786, 90 TNT 232-7 (1990) (dismissing for lack of jurisdiction); (2) 953 F.2d 626 (Fed. Cir. 1992) (reversing the jurisdictional ruling); (3) 31 Fed. Cl. 436, 95 TNT 233-9 (1994) (granting summary judgment to the government); (4) 64 F.3d 647, Doc 95-8287 (10 pages), 95 TNT 173-60 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (reversing the grant of summary judgment and remanding); (5) 519 U.S. 801 (1996) (affirming the Federal Circuit due to the lack of a Supreme Court quorum); (6) 38 Fed. Cl. 166, Doc 97-22403 (33 pages), 97 TNT 148-15 (1997) (granting limited damages to some of the plaintiffs for a limited time period because the statute of limitations had run on many claims); (7) 185 F.3d 1356, Doc 1999-26402 (14 original pages), 1999 TNT 152-77 (Fed. Cir. 1999) (holding that all plaintiffs were entitled to greater damages); 203 F.3d 795, Doc 2000-4281 (10 original pages), 2000 TNT 29-11 (Fed. Cir. 2000) (en banc) (holding that the continuing-claim doctrine overrode the statute of limitations so that the plaintiffs were entitled to damages for a longer time period than that determined by the Court of Federal Claims).

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Table of Contents

I. Hatter ........................................... 1542
II. Original Understanding ......................... 1543
   A. The Permissibility of Raises in Compensation .......... 1543
   B. The Fear of Excessive Judicial Independence .......... 1545
   C. The Founding and Taxation .......................... 1545
III. Nineteenth Century Variations .................. 1546
IV. Twentieth Century Jurisprudence ................ 1546
   A. Evans v. Gore ................................... 1547
   B. Miles v. Graham .................................. 1547
   C. O’Malley v. Woodrough ............................ 1548
   D. United States v. Will .............................. 1548
   E. Intervening Evans .................................. 1549
V. Conclusion ..................................... 1550

TAX NOTES, March 12, 2001

1541
and the case was argued on February 20. (See Tax Notes, Feb. 26, 2001, p. 1151.)

This old-fashioned issue will therefore have another day in the sun, but none of this should have happened. With the Federal Circuit deciding as it did and with a number of federal judges claiming an exemption from a tax of general application (a rather unseemly position for judges to take publicly), it’s understandable the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case. But neither the original understanding nor any other plausible reading of the Compensation Clause supports an absolute tax exemption for federal judges, and Evans v. Gore, the case on which the Federal Circuit relied in Hatter, was effectively overruled in 1939. Originalists and non-originalists should be able to agree: The purposes of the Compensation Clause aren’t implicated in Hatter.

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The Compensation Clause was part of the constitutional structure designed to protect the judiciary against interference from other governmental branches, particularly Congress. The concern was judicial independence, not preserving the after-tax incomes of federal judges. It’s certainly true that a tax directed at specific judges would violate the Compensation Clause, and it’s probably true that a tax directed only at the judiciary would violate the clause. For that matter, it might even be the case that a facially neutral statute motivated by a congressional intent to influence the judiciary would fail constitutional requirements. But those interesting hypotheticals have nothing to do with Hatter. Requiring that federal judges be subject to the same taxing scheme applicable to other Americans shouldn’t affect judicial independence at all.

In this article, we examine the merits of the dispute in Hatter. After a brief description of the specifics of the case, we discuss two areas that should affect Hatter’s resolution: the original understanding of the Compensation Clause and the 20th century jurisprudence on the relationship between the clause and the taxing power. Both suggest—clearly, we think—that the Federal Circuit’s decision should be reversed. Along the way we also discuss some 19th century misunderstandings of the Compensation Clause.

I. Hatter

The controversies in Hatter are beginning to strain the capacities of law libraries and electronic databases. Eight opinions have been issued so far, and more words are on the way.

Judge Terry Hatter and several other federal judges sued in 1989, challenging the application to them of the wage taxes that fund the social security old-age, survivors, and disability insurance (OASDI) program and the Medicare hospital insurance program. Before 1983, most federal employees, including judges, were exempt from social security taxes because of the separate retirement systems established by the federal government on their behalf. But the Tax Equity and Fiscal

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5At least 10 suits involving almost 100 other federal judges with similar claims are in the pipeline. See Petition for Certiorari, App. L, United States v. Hatter (No. 99-1978). No members of the Supreme Court have been parties to Hatter or any of the other cases. See id.; Linda Greenhouse, “Supreme Court Roundup: Court to Review Benefits Tax on U.S. Judges,” N.Y. Times, Oct. 17, 2000, at A29.

6Four justices recused themselves when the case reached the Court in 1996, see 519 U.S. 801 (1996), apparently because they might have been “entitled to refunds if the plaintiffs’ broadest remedial theory previ[ed].” Greenhouse, supra note 8 (noting that only two justices are not participating in this round, presumably because the passage of time leaves them as the only members of the Court with a potential financial stake in the outcome). Because of the four recusals last time, the Court lacked a quorum of six participating members. See 28 U.S.C. § 2109. Although an affirmation by an equally divided Court has no precedential significance, such a disposition is said to be “conclusive and binding” on the parties. See United States v. Pink, 315 U.S. 203, 216 (1942); Durand v. Essex Co., 74 U.S. (7 Wall.) 107, 113 (1868). The Court’s 1996 disposition might therefore represent the law of the case in Hatter. On the other hand, the law-of-the-case doctrine applies “only with respect to issues previously determined.” Quinn v. Jordan, 440 U.S. 332, 347 n.16 (1979), and the 1996 order under section 2109 was not an adjudication of the merits that would trigger that doctrine. Cf. Hughes Tool Co. v. Trans World Airlines, Inc., 409 U.S. 363, 365 n.1 (1973) (finding that an earlier dismissal of certiorari as improvidently granted was not the law of the case); Neill v. Biggers, 409 U.S. 188, 192 (1972) (refusing to treat the prior affirmation of a state conviction by an equally divided Court as precluding the defendant from raising a federal habeas corpus claim).
The founders debated whether the clause went far enough or whether it went too far, but there was no disagreement about its purpose. That understanding of the Compensation Clause should make Hatter an easy case. If a taxing statute imposes no pressure on a judiciary qua judiciary or on individual judges, its application shouldn’t be limited by the Compensation Clause.

The founders realized that life tenure, while a critical element in protecting judicial independence, wasn’t enough by itself. A guaranteed job wouldn’t mean much if a judge’s compensation could be tied to the content of his decisions. As Justice Story put it in 1833, “Without [the Compensation Clause], the other [provision], as to the tenure of office, would have been utterly nugatory, and indeed a mere mockery.” How impor\-tial would a judge be if he knew that Congress might adjust his salary downward when he didn’t decide cases in the congressionally desired way or that Congress might give him a bonus when he acted as desired? Alexander Hamilton explained in the first sentence of The Federalist No. 79, “Next to permanency in office, nothing can contribute more to the independence of the judges than a fixed provision for their support.”

This wasn’t a hypothetical concern for the founders. The Declaration of Independence condemned King George because he had “made Judges dependent on his Will alone; for the Tenure of their Offices, and the Amount and Payment of their Salaries.” That history pointed to the importance of both life tenure and the Compensation Clause in protecting judges from the sovereign’s commands.

In 1787, the King was out of the picture, of course, but the fundamental issue hadn’t changed. As Alexander Hamilton noted in 1802, “From the injunction, that the compensation of the Judges shall not be diminished, it is manifest that the Constitution intends to guard the independence of those Officers against the Legislative Department: Because, to this department alone would have belonged the power of diminishing their compensations.”

II. Original Understanding

The Compensation Clause isn’t mysterious. It’s clear from the founding debates that the clause was intended to help protect federal judges from external pressures, particularly from Congress and the president, that might keep them from acting impartially. As the Supreme Court wrote in 1980,

The Compensation Clause has its roots in the longstanding Anglo-American tradition of an independent Judiciary. A Judiciary free from control by the Executive and Legislature is essential if there is a right to have claims decided by judges who are free from potential domination by other branches of government.

The founders debated whether the clause went far enough or whether it went too far, but there was no disagreement about its purpose. That understanding of the Compensation Clause should make Hatter an easy case. If a taxing statute imposes no pressure on the judiciary qua judiciary or on individual judges, its application shouldn’t be limited by the Compensation Clause.

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to make sure Congress couldn’t change a judge’s compensation at all. Indeed, the resolution that was the basis for the first debate on judicial compensation at the Constitutional Convention, a resolution introduced by Edmund Randolph of Virginia and sponsored by the Virginia delegation, including Madison, provided that the National Judiciary should “receive punctually at stated times fixed compensation for their services, in which no increase or diminution shall be made so as to affect the persons actually in office at the time of such increase or diminution.” 20 That is, all adjustments in compensation, upward as well as downward, would have been forbidden for any sitting judge.

When this provision of the Virginia plan was first debated at the Convention, on July 11, Gouverneur Morris (representing Pennsylvania) moved that the words “or increase” should be struck because “the Legislature ought to be at liberty to increase salaries as circumstances might require, and . . . this would not create any improper dependence in the Judges.” 18 Benjamin Franklin agreed that increases in compensation should be permitted: “Money may not only become plenteer, but the business of the [judicial] department may increase as the Country becomes more populous.” 19

Avoiding “improper dependence” was the universally acknowledged goal. Madison understood that preventing a reduction in compensation was more important than preventing an increase, but he was still bothered by the prospect of judges interested in higher compensation trying to curry favor with Congress through their decisions:

The dependence will be less if the increase alone should be permitted, but it will be improper even so far to permit a dependence. Whenever an increase is wished by the Judges, or may be in agitation in the legislature, an undue complaisance in the former may be felt towards the latter. If at such a crisis there should be in Court suits to which leading members of the Legislature may be parties, the Judges will be in a situation which ought not to be suffered, if it can be prevented. 21

But there was an obvious practical problem with capping compensation. Inflation could erode the economic position of sitting judges, and good judges might therefore leave for greener pastures. Life tenure isn’t a protection if no one can afford to serve for long. 21

Rather than setting compensation at a specific dollar figure, Madison therefore suggested, why not tie fixed compensation to some always valuable commodity? He proposed that “[t]he variations in the value of money, may be guarded [against] by taking for a standard wheat or some other thing of permanent value.” 22

Linking judicial compensation to wheat is an interesting idea, but Gouverneur Morris pointed out the difficulty:

The value of money may not only alter but the State of Society may alter. In this event the same quantity of wheat, the same value would not be the same compensation. The Amount of salaries must always be regulated by the manners & the style of living in a Country. 23

Morris prevailed on this point, and the prohibition against any “increase” was struck from the draft Clause by a substantial vote.

Madison didn’t give up. In late August, he and James McHenry of Maryland tried to reinstate the prohibition against increases in judicial compensation, and, after Morris repeated how unlikely it was that any particular asset would maintain a constant value as conditions changed, George Mason spoke in favor of the Madison-McHenry motion. Maybe new judges will have to be paid more if the country is going to maintain a quality judiciary, but that doesn’t mean sitting judges should be entitled to more: “There was no weight . . . in the argument drawn from changes in the value of the metals, because this might be provided for by an increase of salaries so made as not to affect persons in office, and this was the only argument on which much stress seemed to have been laid.” 24

Madison and his supporters lost again. General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina responded to Mason, questioning the desirability of a multi-tiered compensation system, particularly if the more senior judges were likely to be paid less:

The importance of the Judiciary will require men of the first talents; large salaries will therefore be necessary, larger than the U.S. can allow in the first instance. He was not satisfied with the expedient mentioned by Col. Mason. He did not think it would have a good effect or a good appearance, for new Judges to come in with higher salaries than old ones. 25

Gouverneur Morris added that a prohibition on increases for sitting judges would be easy to circumvent: “[T]he expedient might be evaded & therefore amounted to nothing. Judges might resign, & then be re-appointed to increased salaries.” 26 The Madison-McHenry motion was defeated, as was another motion made by Madison and Randolph that would have added the following words to the Compensation

182 Id. at 44 (July 18, 1787) (emphasis added). If Madison reported the language of the resolution correctly, the motion should have been to delete “increase or,” but nothing in our argument turns on the placement of the “or.”
19Id. at 44-45.
20Id. at 45.
21The president’s situation is different. While his compensation “shall neither be increased nor diminished during the period for which he shall have been elected,” U.S. Const. art. II, section 1, cl. 7, the presidency wasn’t expected to be a lifetime position and in any event had a fixed term. See id. cl. 1; The Federalist No. 79, supra note 14, at 473.

22Farrand, supra note 17, at 45 (July 18, 1787).
23Id.
24Id. at 429 (Aug. 27, 1787).
25Id. at 429-30.
26Id. at 430.
Clause: "nor increased by any Act of the Legislature which shall operate before the expiration of three years after the passing thereof."29

Throughout these debates at the Convention no one questioned that the goal of the Compensation Clause was to protect judicial impartiality. The founders knew that, while their solutions to the problem were imperfect, they were a lot better than nothing. The most extensive discussion of the Compensation Clause in its final form is found in Hamilton's The Federalist No. 79. Hamilton explained why a fixed salary wouldn't work, if the country was going to keep good people in office,28 but it was still necessary to have "restrictions as to put it out of the power of that body [Congress] to change the condition of the individual for the worse. A man may then be sure of the ground upon which he stands, and can never be deterred from his duty by the apprehension of being placed in a less eligible situation."29 Congress shouldn't be able even to contemplate a reduction in the compensation of individual judges. The threat of such a reduction might deter a judge from his duty, and a "power over a man's subsistence amounts to a power over his will."30 If such a threat isn't involved, however, the Compensation Clause ought to be irrelevant.

B. The Fear of Excessive Judicial Independence

The Anti-Federalists raised a different question about the Compensation Clause and the other provisions protecting judicial impartiality. Unlike James Madison, they worried that the Constitution provided too much independence for the judiciary. For example, Anti-Federalist "Brutus" complained in 1788 that "[t]hey have made the judges independent, in the fullest sense of the word. There is no power above them, to controul any of their decisions. There is no authority that can remove them, and they cannot be controuled by the laws of the legislature."31

Another Anti-Federalist, known as the "Federal Farmer," while more restrained than Brutus, also concluded the Convention had gone overboard. The Clause prevented the legislature from taking the sensible step of reducing judicial salaries across the board should economic conditions warrant:

The same judge may frequently be in office thirty or forty years; there may often be times, as in cases of war, or very high prices, when his salary may reasonably be increased one half or more; in a few years money may become scarce again, and prices fall, and his salary, with equal reason and propriety be decreased and lowered: not to suffer this to be done by consent of all the branches of the legislature, is, I believe, quite a novelty in the affairs of government.32

These Anti-Federalist concerns weren't reflected in the final version of the Compensation Clause. But even the most ardent Anti-Federalists supported the proposition that the judiciary should be protected at least to some extent,33 and the real danger — the danger that a well-crafted Compensation Clause should protect against — was legislative and executive action directed specifically at the judiciary.

C. The Founding and Taxation

Of course there's nothing in the founding debates about the relationship between income taxes and the Compensation Clause because there was no original understanding that anyone's income or wages might be taxed.34 Accordingly, we can't say for sure what the founders would have thought about taxing the income or wages of federal judges. But we have a pretty good idea. It's hard to see how a tax that reaches everyone's income, including that of judges, would have raised any serious concern about judicial independence. There's nothing in the founding debates to suggest federal judges were to be exempt from the taxes that the founders did expect to be imposed, such as duties on imports.35 And the national direct taxes on real es-

27Id.
28"It will readily be understood, that the fluctuations in the value of money and in the state of society rendered a fixed rate of compensation in the constitution inadmissible. What might be extravagant today, might in half a century become penurious and inadequate." The Federalist No. 79, supra note 14, at 473.
29Id.
30Id. at 472; see also id. at 473 ("The salaries of judicial offices may at times be altered, as occasion shall require, yet never so as to lessen the allowance with which any particular judge comes into office, in respect of him.").
33For example, Brutus approvingly referred to the British practice of having "fixed salaries" for judges. Essay of Brutus, No. 15, supra note 31, at 438.
34The Articles of Confederation had effectively given the central government no revenue power, other than requisitioning funds from the states. See Erik M. Jensen and Jonathan L. Entin, "Commandeering, the Tenth Amendment, and the Federal Requisition Power: New York v. United States Revisited," 15 Const. Comm. 353 (1998). In these circumstances, merely permitting the government to levy duties on imports was such a major increase in the national taxing power that a tax on income was almost unimaginable.
35In any event, if an income tax had been imagined, it would have been understood to be subject to the direct-tax apportionment rule, U.S. Const. art. I, section 2, cl. 3; art. I, section 9, cl. 4 — or so one of us believes. In Jensen's view, the Supreme Court was right in 1895 when it struck down an income tax on the ground that it was a direct tax that hadn't been properly apportioned among the states on the basis of population. Pollock v. Farmers' Loan & Trust Co. 157 U.S. 429 (1895), 158 U.S. 601 (1895). See Erik M. Jensen, "The Apportionment of 'Direct' Taxes: Are Consumption Taxes Constitutional?" 97 Colum. L. Rev. 2334, 2366-75 (1997).
36The founders thought the burden of such indirect taxes would be borne by purchasers. See Jensen, supra note 34, at 2393-95. As far as we know, no one thought a judge purchasing imported goods should be immune from the effects of an impost.
tate that were enacted beginning in 1798 — and appor-
tioned to meet the requirements of the direct-tax
clauses of the Constitution — contained no exemp-
tions for federal judges; even though such a tax would
obviously have "diminished" the economic position of
any judge subject to the tax.37

III. Nineteenth Century Variations

Some 19th century developments don’t reflect this
understanding of the Compensation Clause; they show
confusion about the purposes of the clause. There was
some sentiment that the clause limited Congress’s
power to tax the income of federal judges, but the
question was never specifically ruled on by any court.
When Congress enacted the Civil War income tax,38
Chief Justice Taney protested to the Secretary of the
Treasury against applying the tax to judges: "The act
in question, as you interpret it, diminishes the compen-
sation of every judge three per cent, and if it can be
diminished to that extent by the name of a tax, it may
in the same way be reduced from time to time at the
pleasure of the legislature."39

Taney conceded the propriety of litigating his ob-
jections to the tax,40 but his position received a sym-
pathetic response soon afterward. In 1869, Attorney
General Hoar issued an opinion stating that a tax on
judicial salaries would violate the Compensation

36 See U.S. Const. art. I, section 2, cl. 3; art. I, section 9, cl. 4;
see also Jensen, supra note 34, at 2355-56 (discussing direct
taxes on real estate enacted between 1798 and 1861).
37 See, e.g., Act of July 14, 1798, ch. 75, 1 Stat. 597. Of course,
the measure of such a tax wouldn’t have been “compens-
ation,” as we generally understand the term. But if the concern
under the Compensation Clause is only whether a judge is
hurt economically by a new tax — and that has to be the
argument at the foundation of Judge Hatter’s case — why
should we care whether $100 in taxes is paid pursuant to
something called an income tax or something called a prop-
erty tax?
38 A 3 percent tax was initially applied to “all salaries of
officers, or payments to persons in the . . . service of the
United States,” Act of July 1, 1862, ch. 119, section 66, 12 Stat.
432, 472, which was interpreted to include the president and
the judiciary.
39 Letter from R.B. Taney to Hon. S.P. Chase (Feb. 16, 1863),
reprinted in 157 U.S. 701, 701 (1895). At Taney’s request, this
letter was made part of the Court’s records by an order dated
March 30, 1863, see id., but was not published for another 32
years. The letter appears in the same volume of the U.S.
Reports that contains the first decision in the Income Tax Cases,
Pollock v. Farmers’ Loan & Trust Co., 157 U.S. 429 (1895). We
do not know whether this was coincidental.
40 See 157 U.S. at 702 (observing that “all of the judges of
the courts of the United States have an interest in the ques-
tion, and could not therefore with propriety undertake to
hear and decide it”). Twentieth century judges have been less
reluctant to entertain Compensation Clause claims by their
brethren even in situations where they have a financial stake
in the outcome. See, e.g., United States v. Will, 449 U.S. 200,
211-17 (1980) (invoking the Rule of Necessity).

41 Four years later, the government refunded the
taxes paid by federal judges.42 Justice Field, too, sub-
sequently questioned the validity of taxing judges’
salaries.43

Despite Taney’s self-serving claim that the indirect
effects of an income tax on judicial salaries might create
"the suspicion of undue influence"44 — a claim un-
derlying the other objections as well — it’s hard to see
how those suspicions could have developed or why the
judges deserved a refund. The Civil War income tax
didn’t fall only, or primarily, on judges. Where’s the
possible influence on the judiciary?

IV. Twentieth Century Jurisprudence

We’ve demonstrated, to our satisfaction at least, that
the original understanding of the Compensation Clause
doesn’t preclude imposing a tax of general appli-
cation on sitting federal judges. And we’re equally
convincing that Supreme Court jurisprudence on the
Compensation Clause, despite the 19th century diver-
sions and another false start in 1920, supports the same
conclusion. Yes, Evans v. Gore45 (1920) and Miles v.
Graham46 (1925), if they remained good law, would
preclude the taxes at issue in Hatter. But those cases
aren’t good law; they aren’t even close. They
misinterpreted the Compensation Clause, and the
Court in 1939, in O’Malley v. Woodrough,47 gutted both
cases. Moreover, while the Court in United States v.
Will,48 decided in 1980, vigorously applied the Com-
ensation Clause to strike down the retroactive repeal
of judicial cost-of-living increases (one of which had
been in place for only a few hours), that case in no way
revives the properly discredited understanding of
Evans.

If there’s nothing left of Evans v. Gore, there’s noth-
ing to Judge Hatter’s case. We think Evans was wrongly

413 Op. Att’y Gen. 161 (1869). But a 1919 opinion by At-
orney General Palmer found the objections to such taxes
unpersuasive after a more thorough review than Hoar had
Court nonetheless reaffirmed Attorney General Hoar’s
opinion the following year. See Evans v. Gore, 253 U.S. 245,
258-59 (1920).
42See Wayne v. United States, 26 Ct. Cl. 274, 290 (1919). The
Wayne court noted “the general acquiescence of the profes-
sion” in the impropriety of taxing judges, id., but didn’t
address the constitutionality of the practice. Instead, the case
concerned a claim by the estate of Justice Wayne to recover
the amount owed him after his refund warrant was stolen
before delivery. See id. at 275-76.
43 Field concurred in the invalidation of the 1894 income
tax, pointing to the application of the tax to federal judges
as one of many reasons why he thought the tax had to fail.
See Pollock v. Farmers’ Bank & Trust Co., 157 U.S. 429, 604-06
(1895).
44157 U.S. at 702. It’s self-serving in that it supports ex-
emption from tax. It’s hardly self-serving in the image it
presents of the judiciary:
45253 U.S. 245 (1920).
47307 U.S. 277 (1939).
decided to begin with — it was inconsistent with the purposes of the Compensation Clause — but, even if we’re wrong about that, we’ll run through the cases to demonstrate why Evans hasn’t withstood the test of time.

A. Evans v. Gore

In the first post-Sixteenth Amendment income tax statute, the compensation of federal judges was exempted from the tax.49 In general, Congress, feeling its way slowly because the boundaries of the Amendment were unclear, drafted the Income Tax Law of 1913 conservatively, not seeking to tax many items that might have been within congressional power.50

Yes, Evans v. Gore and Miles v. Graham, if they remained good law, would preclude the taxes at issue in Hatter. But those cases aren’t good law; they aren’t even close.

Wartime revenue needs overcame congressional conservatism, however, and, in the Revenue Act of 1918, Congress extended the tax base, “including in the case of the President of the United States [and] the judges of the Supreme and inferior courts of the United States . . . the compensation received as such.”51 A federal judge appointed to the bench in 1899, long before the effective date of the Act — and, for that matter, long before the Sixteenth Amendment began its move through the state legislatures in 1909 — challenged the application of the Revenue Act to him, culminating in the Supreme Court’s 1920 decision in Evans v. Gore.52

The Supreme Court concluded the tax was invalid under the Compensation Clause. Despite a dissent from Justice Holmes,53 the majority opinion, written by Justice Van Devanter, reads as if this case were a no-brainer. The opinion is striking in its failure to examine the purposes of the Compensation Clause, except at the most abstract level. No diminution in compensation means no income tax, regardless of whether the tax reaches other government officials, regardless of whether it’s a tax that applies generally. At no point did the Court make a serious effort to explain what the danger to the judiciary was from a tax of general application. The Court quoted extensively from many of the usual suspects concerning judicial independence, but never tied that discussion to the particulars of the case before it.54

B. Miles v. Graham

In Evans, the Court hadn’t seemed to rely on the fact that the judge was already sitting when the Revenue Act of 1918 went into effect, but some suggested that fact might have been crucial to the result. If a judge assumes office after a tax is already on the books — so that he can do the calculations about his future economic position taking the tax into account — what possible claim is there that his compensation has been diminished by the tax?55 Nevertheless, the Supreme Court, in 1925, in Miles v. Graham,56 concluded that such a judge was also protected from federal income taxation.

Judge Graham’s appointment was effective September 1, 1919, after the Revenue Act of 1918 was in place. So, asked Justice McReynolds, “[d]oes the circumstance that [Graham’s] appointment came after the taxing act

49 See Income Tax Law of 1913, ch. 16, section II.B., 38 Stat. 114, 168 (“in computing net income under this section there shall be excluded . . . the compensation . . . of the judges of the supreme and inferior courts of the United States now in office”).
50 After the Supreme Court had rejected the 1894 income tax as a direct tax that hadn’t been properly apportioned among the states on the basis of population, the Sixteenth Amendment removed all doubt, by permitting an unapportioned tax on incomes “from whatever source derived,” from the apportionment requirement. U.S. Const. amend. XVI. But the early post-Amendment Congresses generally took a restrained view of what could be included in “income.” For example, Congress didn’t try to tax dividends representing the distribution of pre-1913 corporate earnings, although the Supreme Court later suggested that would have been within congressional power. See Eisner v. Macomber, 252 U.S. 189, 204 (1920). And Congress didn’t try to tax appreciation in the value of property from the pre-1913 period, even if the realization of the appreciation occurred after ratification of the Amendment. See Revenue Act of 1918, ch. 18, section 202(a)(1), 40 Stat. 1057, 1060 (providing that basis of “property acquired before March 1, 1913, [would be] the fair market value of such property as of that date”).
51 Ch. 18, section 213(a), 40 Stat. 1057, 1065.
52 253 U.S. 245 (1920).
53 See Income Tax Law of 1913, ch. 16, section II.B., 38 Stat. 114, 168 (“in computing net income under this section there shall be excluded . . . the compensation . . . of the judges of the supreme and inferior courts of the United States now in office”).
54 After the Supreme Court had rejected the 1894 income tax as a direct tax that hadn’t been properly apportioned among the states on the basis of population, the Sixteenth Amendment removed all doubt, by permitting an unapportioned tax on incomes “from whatever source derived,” from the apportionment requirement. U.S. Const. amend. XVI. But the early post-Amendment Congresses generally took a restrained view of what could be included in “income.” For example, Congress didn’t try to tax dividends representing the distribution of pre-1913 corporate earnings, although the Supreme Court later suggested that would have been within congressional power. See Eisner v. Macomber, 252 U.S. 189, 204 (1920). And Congress didn’t try to tax appreciation in the value of property from the pre-1913 period, even if the realization of the appreciation occurred after ratification of the Amendment. See Revenue Act of 1918, ch. 18, section 202(a)(1), 40 Stat. 1057, 1060 (providing that basis of “property acquired before March 1, 1913, [would be] the fair market value of such property as of that date”).
55 Ch. 18, section 213(a), 40 Stat. 1057, 1065.
56 253 U.S. 245 (1920).
require a different view concerning his right to exemption?" 57 The answer (for all but dissenting Justice Brandeis) was No:

The words and history of the clause indicate that the purpose was to impose upon Congress the duty definitely to declare what sum shall be received by each judge out of the public funds and the times for payment. When this duty has been complied with, the amount specified become the compensation which is protected against diminution during his continuance in office. 58

The applicable statute said Judge Graham should be paid $7,500 and that, said Justice McReynolds, was that.

C. O’Malley v. Woodrough

In 1939, the Court revisited the Compensation Clause in O’Malley v. Woodrough. 59 In the Revenue Act of 1932, Congress had provided that the statutory term "gross income" would include compensation of "judges of courts of the United States taking office after June 6, 1932." 60 Judge Woodrough, fitting within that defined category, brought suit, reasonably arguing that, under Miles v. Graham, the tax couldn’t be applied to federal judges.

The difference between the Court’s analysis in 1939 and the two cases from the 1920s is the difference between night and day.

The difference between the Court’s analysis in 1939 and the two cases from the 1920s is the difference between night and day. Justice Frankfurter reexamined the Compensation Clause and concluded that the tax at issue didn’t affect judicial independence, which is what the clause is all about. Moreover, it obviously irritated the Court that Judge Woodrough was seeking to avoid the civic obligations of ordinary citizens; judges ought to pay their share of the costs of civilization. Some samples from the Frankfurter opinion suggest its scope:

The meaning which Evans v. Gore imparted to the history which explains Article III, section 1 was contrary to the way in which it was read by other English-speaking courts. 61

To suggest that [the tax] makes inroads upon the independence of judges who took office after Congress had thus charged them with the common duties of citizenship, by making them bear their aliquot share of the cost of maintaining the Government, is to trivialize the great historic experience on which the framers based the safeguards of Article III, section 1. 62

To subject them to a general tax is merely to recognize that judges are also citizens, and that their particular function in government does not generate an immunity from sharing with their fellow citizens the material burden of the government whose Constitution and laws they are charged with administering. 63

To be sure, one sentence quoted above alludes to the fact that Judge Woodrough was appointed after the tax was extended to members of the judiciary, but a fair reading of Justice Frankfurter’s opinion shows that this statement merely reflects the particular details of the lawsuit. Nothing in O’Malley supports a constitutional distinction between incumbent judges and new judges for tax purposes. Justice Frankfurter began his discussion with the first quotation, which strongly condemned the approach taken in Evans v. Gore, and the rest of his analysis applies to all judges — whenever they were appointed.

The reasoning in O’Malley is totally inconsistent with that in Evans and Miles. Nevertheless, Justice Frankfurter said nothing directly about the continuing vitality of Evans, and he couldn’t even bring himself to say that Miles had been entirely overturned. Frankfurter wrote only that "to the extent that what the Court now says is inconsistent with what was said in Miles v. Graham, the latter cannot survive." 64 Miles was clearly rejected in its entirety, however, and Frankfurter’s logic cannot be limited to that decision. Because Miles rested exclusively on Evans, the repudiation of Miles necessarily eviscerated Evans as well. 65

D. United States v. Will

This interpretation was confirmed in the 1980 case of United States v. Will, 66 a case that has attracted more attention for its discussion of the propriety of the Supreme Court’s addressing the merits of a lawsuit about judicial salaries than for its discussion of the Compensation Clause. In Will, the Court held that certain retroactive cancellations of scheduled cost-of-living raises for federal judges violated the clause, even though the cancellation affected members of the other.

57Id. at 508.
58Id. at 508-99.
59307 U.S. 277 (1939).
60Ch. 209, section 22(a), 47 Stat. 169, 178, reenacted by Revenue Act of 1936, ch. 690, section 22(a), 49 Stat. 1648, 1657. It wasn’t until 1957 that statutory provisions specifically taxing judicial salaries were eliminated as surplusage. See S. Rep. No. 1622, 83d Cong., 2d Sess. 148 (1954); 1 Bittker and Lokken, supra note 55, para. 1.2.7.
61O’Malley, 307 U.S. at 281.
62Id. at 282.
63Id.
64Id. at 282-83.
65If Evans remained good law after O’Malley, the Compensation Clause presumably would require the maintenance of the real, rather than the nominal, value of judicial salaries. But the Court of Claims, relying heavily on O’Malley, rejected this argument in a case brought by a group of Article III judges whose salaries had declined in real terms by 34.4 percent over a six-year period. See Atkins v. United States, 556 F.2d 1028 (Ct. Cl. 1977), cert. denied 434 U.S. 1009 (1978).
64449 U.S. 200 (1980).
government branches as well. 67 Despite the general character of the cancellations, the Court wrote that "[t]he inclusion in the freeze of other officials who are not protected by the Compensation Clause does not insulate a direct diminution in judges' salaries from the clear mandate of that Clause; the Constitution makes no exceptions for 'nondiscriminatory' reductions." 68

1. O'Malley and Evans. Although the extension of social security taxes to which judge Hatter objects is also nondiscriminatory, Will doesn't help his position. Hatter is challenging a reduction in his net pay, not his gross salary — which was the issue in Will. In subjecting Article III judges to the taxes at issue in Hatter, Congress treated them the same way it treated high-level officials of the legislative and executive branches and the same way that virtually all other citizens are treated. For this reason, the purposes of the Compensation Clause aren't implicated in the case. As the Will Court presciently noted: "This is quite different from the situation in O'Malley... There the Court held that the Compensation Clause was not offended by an income tax levied on Article III judges as well as on other taxpayers; there was no discrimination against the plaintiff judge." 69 Like Judge Woodrough, Judge Hatter is suffering no discrimination when compared with the rest of the American population and therefore no unconstitutional diminution in salary: "In O'Malley... this Court held that the immunity in the Compensation Clause would not extend to exempting judges from paying taxes, a duty shared by all citizens. The Court thus recognized that the Compensation Clause does not forbid everything that might adversely affect judges." 70

We hate to think that the judges are suggesting that their impartiality on the bench might be affected by their having been forced to become part of the social security system.

If all of that isn't clear enough, the Will Court noted what had been apparent for decades — that O'Malley had left Evans staggering, even if not officially down for the count. Pointing to Justice Frankfurter's statement in O'Malley that "to the extent Miles v. Graham... was inconsistent, it 'cannot survive,'" the Will Court noted the obvious: "Because Miles relied on Evans v. Gore, O'Malley must also be read to undermine the reasoning of Evans..." 71

Yes, it must be read that way, and that's why Supreme Court jurisprudence doesn't support Judge Hatter's claim.

2. Another rationale for the Compensation Clause? But perhaps we've been looking at the purpose of the Compensation Clause too narrowly. Maybe the clause furthers another, related purpose. As well as promoting judicial independence, it ensures a prospective judge that, in abandoning private practice — more often than not more lucrative than the bench — the compensation of the new post will not diminish. Beyond doubt, such assurance has served to attract able lawyers to the bench and thereby enhances the quality of justice. 72

While it's true that the Compensation Clause can have effects on recruiting, we're skeptical this was a "purpose" of the clause at the founding. 73 But even if the clause can be justified as a way of making judicial service more attractive, this rationale doesn't apply to a tax that affects the population as a whole. If a potential judge is going to be subject to social security taxes whether he takes a judicial post or not, the quality of the judiciary shouldn't suffer because of the tax. 74

E. Interring Evans

Since the Supreme Court has never explicitly overruled Evans v. Gore, the Federal Circuit in Hatter concluded that Evans was still good law. 75 But that's wishful thinking. Everything Justice Frankfurter said in O'Malley about the purposes of the Compensation Clause suggested that the intellectual foundation for Evans had been destroyed, as Will recognized. Frankfurter's failure to state explicitly that Evans had been overruled reflected judicial caution, nothing more. Evans and O'Malley can't both be the law.

67 The Court upheld the prospective cancellation of other pay raises, finding no Compensation Clause violation in withholding from judges (as well as high-level executive officials and members of Congress) projected salary increases that had never taken effect. See id. at 229; see also Williams v. United States, 2001 WL 128053 (Fed. Cir. 2001) (rejecting Compensation Clause challenge to prospective cancellation of judicial pay raises).

68 Will, 449 U.S. at 226.

69 Id.

70 Id. at 227 n.31.

71 Id.

72 Id. at 226-21 (citing Evans v. Gore, 253 U.S. 245, 253 (1920); 1 James Kent, Commentaries on American Law 276 (1826)).

73 Removing the prohibition on increases in the first version of what became the Compensation Clause was certainly intended to make attracting qualified judges easier, see supra text accompanying note 25, but that's not the same as saying the purpose of the clause was to help prospective judges resist the enticements of law practice.

74 Of course, eliminating taxes on the income of federal judges could be a backdoor way of increasing their real compensation, and the argument has been made that Judge Hatter should prevail precisely because higher compensation is needed to attract good people. As salaries for new law firm associates skyrocket, one can applaud the sentiment, but we shouldn't conflate policy arguments and the requirements of constitutional law.

75 See 64 F.3d 647, 650 (Fed. Cir. 1995).
The absence of "the magic word 'overruled'" can't resurrect Evans. The Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education didn't expressly overrule Plessy v. Ferguson, either. The Brown Court simply "rejected" statements in Plessy that were contrary to "modern [psychological] authority" and "concluded[d] that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place." Nevertheless, many subsequent cases have said that Brown really did overrule Plessy, and certainly everyone thinks that's what happened. Brown did to Plessy what O'Malley did to Evans.

The Supreme Court's reluctance to overrule moribund precedents hasn't prevented lower courts from recognizing their lack of vitality. Perhaps the most notable example is Barnette v. West Virginia State Board of Education, where the district court foresightedly declined to follow the two-year-old precedent of Minersville School District v. Gobitis because of evidence that the Supreme Court no longer regarded that ruling as sound but had not formally interred it.

In fact, several lower courts have remarked on the apparent demise of Evans v. Gore despite the Supreme Court's failure to repudiate it explicitly. It's perhaps understandable that the Federal Circuit has refused to treat Evans as a dead letter in light of the Supreme Court's recent insistence that lower courts follow all high court precedents, however fragile they might appear, until the justices themselves apply the coup de grâce. That's why the Court should take the opportunity presented in Hatter to overrule Evans once and for all.

V. Conclusion

The position taken by the federal judges prosecuting the Hatter case requires reading the Compensation Clause in a mindlessly literal way, and, even then, it's not the only literalist interpretation imaginable. ("Compensation," as that term is used in many contexts, is not diminished by imposition of a tax. An income tax obviously affects after-tax income; it doesn't affect the level of salary paid by an employer to employee, at least not directly.) Certainly the judges' reading requires ignoring the primary purpose of the Compensation Clause, to protect judicial independence. And we hate to think that the judges are suggesting that their impartiality on the bench might be affected by their having been forced to become part of the social security system.

There's some superficial plausibility to the judges' claim because the legislation extending the social security taxes to federal judges wasn't a statute of general application. It singled out government officials for the new, unhappy consequences. But it didn't single out the judiciary; a fact that should make some difference, and it effectively required only that federal judges be treated like other American citizens. If Congress could have included judges in the social security system to begin with, and we have no doubt on that score, surely Congress shouldn't be precluded from legislating to correct an earlier excess of caution.

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\(^{76}\)See, e.g., Jefferson County v. Acker, 210 F.3d 1317, 1320 (11th Cir. 2000) (noting that the Court in O'Malley and Will "came as close to overruling [Evans] as it could without actually uttering the word"), petition for cert. filed (Sept. 22, 2000) (No. 00-455); Atkins v. United States, 556 F.2d 1028, 1063 (Ct. Cl. 1977) (en banc) (characterizing Evans as "no longer good law"), cert. denied 434 U.S. 1009 (1978); id. at 1044 (observing that O'Malley "by force of reasoning overruled a good deal of Evans"); id. at 1045 (referring to the "overruling" of Evans in O'Malley).

United States v. Hatter and the Taxation of Federal Judges

By Jonathan L. Entin and Erik M. Jensen

In the March 12 issue of Tax Notes, we characterized United States v. Hatter,¹ which had been argued before the Supreme Court on February 20, as a slam-dunk case.² Exhibiting the doubt-free perspective of law professors, we saw no good reason for the Court to strike down the extension of the old-age, survivors, and disability insurance (OASDI) tax and the Medicare tax to federal judges on the bench in 1983.³ By bringing judges into the social security system, Congress merely acted to subject judges to the same taxes applicable to the rest of us, or so we argued, not to diminish the judges' compensation in a way forbidden by the Compensation Clause of the Constitution.⁴ Furthermore, we argued that Evans v. Gore,⁵ the 1920 Supreme Court case on which the Federal Circuit had relied in holding for the judges in Hatter, had been dead for more than 60 years and deserved an official funeral.⁶

On May 21, the Court issued its decision in Hatter. Not surprisingly, the Court tossed the last shovelful of dirt on Evans's grave: "We now overrule Evans insofar as it holds that the Compensation Clause forbids Congress to apply a generally applicable, nondiscriminatory tax to the salaries of federal judges, whether or not they were appointed before enactment of the tax." Also not surprisingly, the Court, over the dissents of Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, upheld the application of the Medicare tax to federal judges. But, to our surprise, the Court held that the extension of the OASDI tax to those judges sitting in 1983 was in fact discriminatory and, therefore, invalid under the Compensation Clause, even though Congress hadn't intended to single out the judiciary for unfavorable treatment. All seven participating justices (Sandra Day O'Connor and John Paul Stevens were recused) thought the OASDI tax was constitutionally infirm as applied to Judge Hatter and other judges sitting in 1983.⁷

We think that, given the purpose of the Compensation Clause, the Court got the OASDI issue wrong, as we'll demonstrate later. But in Part I we'll first explain the real significance of Hatter—that it's now hard to imagine any realistic situation in which a federal taxing

¹The Court's opinion is at 121 S. Ct. 1782 (2001), Doc 2001-14515 (33 original pages), 2001 TNT 99-8.
⁴The Compensation Clause provides that federal judges "shall, at stated Times, receive for their Services, a Compensation, which shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office." U.S. Const. art. III, section 1.
⁵253 U.S. 245 (1920).
⁶The Court in Evans concluded that extending the income tax to federal judges violated the Compensation Clause, but Evans was eviscerated in 1939. See O'Malley v. Woodrow, 307 U.S. 277 (1939); Entin and Jensen, supra note 2, at 1548. Because the Supreme Court hadn't explicitly overruled Evans, however, the Federal Circuit reasonably treated the case as if it had effect. See Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1790; Entin and Jensen, supra note 2, at 1550.
⁷Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1790. Six of the seven participating justices voted to overturn Evans. In his opinion concurring on the OASDI tax issue but dissenting on the Medicare tax, Justice Scalia wrote, "The Court's decision today simply recognizes what should be obvious: that Evans has not only been undermined, but has in fact collapsed." Id. at 1798. Only Justice Thomas thought Evans was rightly decided. See infra notes 17-18 and accompanying text.
⁸The Court added that the infirmity of the tax wasn't cured by later increases in judicial compensation. Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1796-97.
statute could be deemed to violate the Compensation Clause. If we’re right about that, the OASDI tax analysis, discussed in Part II of the article, is an historical artifact; it matters to the judges involved, of course, but it will have no effect on the development of the law.

I. Compensation and Taxation After Hatter

The most important part of Hatter is the repudiation, once and for all, of the core of Evans v. Gore and the acceptance of the proposition that the Compensation Clause affects only those taxes that discriminate against the judiciary. The narrow holding involving the OASDI tax, which depended on a determination that there was discrimination, reflected a set of special facts that can’t be duplicated, or even approached, in the future. The Compensation Clause should therefore never again have any serious effect on the national taxing power.

As we argued in our first article, the Compensation Clause was part of the constitutional structure designed to protect the judiciary against interference from other governmental branches, particularly Congress. The concern was judicial independence, not preserving the economic positions of federal judges. A tax of general application, one that isn’t directed at the judiciary in general or at individual judges in particular, shouldn’t implicate the clause.

The Court’s general pronouncements in Hatter are perfectly consistent with that understanding of the Compensation Clause. As Justice Stephen G. Breyer wrote for the Court, “In our view, the Clause does not prevent Congress from imposing a ‘non-discriminatory tax laid generally upon judges and other citizens,... but it does prohibit taxation that singles out judges for specially unfavorable treatment.”

When taxation is involved, the Compensation Clause analysis is therefore different from that used in examining congressional actions affecting judicial salaries. In 1980 the Court had decided, in United States v. Will,11 that Congress may not reduce judicial salaries, even if done as part of a nondiscriminatory cost-cutting move. But, with taxation, the only concern is whether there has been discrimination against the judiciary in a way that might damage judicial independence. As Justice Breyer wrote in Hatter, [T]here is no good reason why a judge should not share the tax burdens borne by all citizens. We concede that this Court [in Will] has held that the Legislature cannot directly reduce judicial salaries even as part of an equitable effort to reduce all Government salaries... But a tax law... affects compensation indirectly, not directly... [The] prophylactic considerations that may justify an absolute rule forbidding direct salary reductions are absent here... In practice, the likelihood that a nondiscriminatory tax represents a disguised legislative effort to influence the judicial will is virtually nonexistent. Hence the potential threats to judicial independence that underlie the Constitution’s compensation guarantee cannot justify a special judicial exemption from a commonly shared tax, not even as a preventive measure to counter those threats.12

We agree completely. Where we differ with the Court is in its conclusion that the extension of the OASDI tax to sitting judges — the elimination of a tax exemption to which judges had been entitled — was in fact discriminatory. As we’ll discuss in Part II, we’re unconvinced that Congress “singly[d] out judges for specially unfavorable treatment”13 in a way that should implicate the Compensation Clause.

With Evans overruled, no longer can anyone seriously argue that federal judges are exempt from a generally applicable income tax or from, say, an increase in rates under a generally applicable income tax.

But whatever the merits of the Court’s consideration of the OASDI tax, that analysis should have no effect on the subsequent treatment of taxation under the Compensation Clause. A Hatter-like set of facts, involving the repeal of a tax exemption for federal judges, can’t arise again: As far as we know, no similar exemptions remain on the books, and Congress is unlikely to exempt federal judges from any other generally applicable tax in the future.14 Moreover, as Justice Breyer noted in Hatter, the likelihood that a facially nondiscriminatory tax could represent an attack on the judiciary is “virtually nonexistent.”15 As a result, a federal income tax could raise Compensation Clause

9See Entin and Jensen, supra note 2, at 1543-45.
10Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1792 (citations omitted). In our first article we noted that the Court had yet to decide whether a facially neutral statute motivated by a congressional intent to influence the judiciary could ever fail constitutional requirements. See Entin and Jensen, supra note 2, at 1543 n. 6 (citing United States v. Will, 449 U.S. 200, 226 n.30 (1980)). The quoted language from Hatter seems to resolve that issue, at least for taxing statutes.
11Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1787. Justice Scalia thinks that discrimination is unnecessary to invalidate a tax under the Compensation Clause, see infra note 16, and Justice Thomas apparently thinks that any income tax unconstitutionally diminishes judicial compensation. See infra notes 17-18 and accompanying text.
12We doubt there would be political support for such an exemption to begin with, and the result in Hatter, making it difficult for Congress to get rid of an exemption once it’s on the books, is an additional deterrent to creating any new exemption.
13See supra text accompanying note 12.
issues after Hatter only if Congress were to target the tax (or part of the tax) at federal judges. Such a discriminatory tax makes for a nice classroom hypothetical, but it’s not a real world possibility.\footnote{Justice Scalia’s position also appears to be irrelevant to future analysis. Scalia criticized the Court’s emphasis on discrimination, which the Compensation Clause doesn’t mention. Instead, he would seek to determine whether a tax exemption has become part of judges’ “compensation.” Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1798. If so, the exemption couldn’t be eliminated for sitting judges, whether or not discrimination against the judiciary is involved. Moreover, Scalia determined that a “tax-free status conditioned on federal employment is compensation,” id. at 1799, leading to his conclusion that the imposition of the Medicare tax on sitting judges was impermissible. But since judges no longer have such “compensatory” tax exemptions, none of this should matter for the future.}

With Evans overruled, no longer can anyone seriously argue that federal judges are exempt from a generally applicable income tax or from, say, an increase in rates under a generally applicable income tax. Although Justice Thomas, in a two-sentence opinion, wrote that the “Court was correct in Evans v. Core . . . when it held that any tax that reduces a judge’s net compensation violates Article III of the Constitution,”\footnote{Id. at 1800 (citation omitted).} that statement is far removed from the common understanding of the last 60 years.\footnote{In the context of Hatter, that position meant only that Justice Thomas thought the Medicare tax should have been struck down as well as the OASDI tax. But the implications of Justice Thomas’s statement are astonishing. He seems to be suggesting that federal judges are constitutionally exempt from all income tax obligations. One of us (Jensen) has originalist leanings, but even he thinks the idea that the Compensation Clause bars application of a tax of general application to federal judges is totally inconsistent with the original purpose of the Clause.}

II. The OASDI Tax Analysis

As we’ve suggested, the Court’s analysis of the OASDI tax is unlikely to have significance for the development of the law. But it’s still worth explaining why we think the Court’s position isn’t persuasive.

The difficulty with the extension of the OASDI tax to federal judges, concluded the Court, was that the extension did in fact discriminate against the judges. We’ll explain below that the Court’s conclusion places us in a Catch-22: Judges were the main targets of the 1983 OASDI extension in part because the Court itself had suggested that Congress couldn’t apply the OASDI tax to the federal judiciary when the Social Security Act was passed in 1935. Even without that problem, though, the Court’s reasoning is questionable.

The conclusion that the extension of the OASDI tax discriminated against federal judges resulted from a complicated, four-step analysis presented by Justice Breyer. First, because of retirement plans already in place, federal employees had been outside the social security system before enactment of the 1983 changes. Second, the 1983 changes in fact didn’t increase the financial obligations of nearly all (96 percent) federal employees in office at that time because those employees were given the choice whether to enter the social security system or not.\footnote{Newly hired employees were given no such choice.} While in form the remaining 4 percent of the federal employees seemed to have no such choice, it was in fact only the federal judges and a few insignificant other officials (like the president)\footnote{The President’s pension is noncontributory . . . . And the President himself, like the judges, is protected against diminution in his “[c]ompensation” . . . . These facts may help establish congressional good faith. But, as we have said, we do not doubt that good faith. And we do not see why otherwise the separate and special example of that single individual, the President should make a crucial difference here. Hatter, 121 S. Ct. at 1796 (citations omitted). That single individual indeed!}—people whose government retirement plans were noncontributory—who were hurt financially by the 1983 changes in the law.\footnote{The retirement plan for judges is noncontributory, wrote Justice Breyer, because the Constitution permits judges to “draw a salary for life simply by continuing to serve . . . . That fact means that a contributory system, in all likelihood, would not work.” Id. at 1794 (citation omitted). That likelihood, said Breyer, gave a constitutional dimension to the plan arrangements: “The 1983 statute consequently singles out judges for adverse treatment solely because of a feature required by the Constitution to preserve judicial independence.” Id. Whatever the difficulties with a contributory plan, we don’t see how a noncontributory plan is “required” by the Constitution.} Third, the federal judges had to pay more, and got nothing in return. Because of pre-judicial employment, nearly all were already fully insured under the social security system. Finally, said the Court, the changes didn’t serve to “[equalize] the retirement-related obligations that pre-1983 law imposed upon judges with the retirement-related obligations that pre-1983 law imposed upon other current high-level federal employees.”\footnote{Id.}

To put the argument more simply: federal judges, and (with an exception or two) only federal judges, had increased tax obligations from the 1983 changes, with no compensating benefits. That’s discriminatory and therefore inconsistent with the Compensation Clause.

We’re not convinced. The Court’s analysis required a lengthy series of steps, and suppositions, to come to the determination that the statutory effects were discriminatory. The level of detail required to conclude that the Compensation Clause was violated was extraordinary when, as Justice Breyer noted, there was no evidence whatsoever that Congress was acting to single out the judiciary for unfortunate consequences, and the effect of the legislation was merely to bring the judiciary into the broadly applicable social security system. It’s true that sitting judges were harmed economically by the 1983 changes, but we don’t see how judicial independence was implicated by these congressional actions.

Justice Breyer supplied a response to that criticism, but it was totally unsatisfactory. He suggested that if
the rules were otherwise, Congress could secretly punish the judges while professing high-minded goals: The Government also argues that there is no evidence here that Congress singled out judges for special treatment in order to intimidate, influence, or punish them. But this Court has never insisted upon such evidence. To require it is to invite legislative efforts that embody, but lack evidence of, some such intent, engendering suspicion among the branches and consequently undermining that mutual respect that the Constitution demands... Nothing in the record discloses anything other than benign congressional motives. If the Compensation Clause is to offer meaningful protection, however, we cannot limit that protection to instances in which the Legislature manifests, say, direct hostility to the Judiciary. 25

The posited concern about a vast congressional conspiracy is hard to take seriously. It’s inconceivable that Congress — a group of 535 very independent, very voluble people — could ever take an action motivated by such hostility without leaving traces along the way. Judicial independence wasn’t affected one whit by the 1983 changes, and that should have been enough to decide the case. 24 At a more fundamental level, the Court’s elaborate analysis of the OASDI tax issue ignores the context in which Congress was legislating. Now that Hatter has been decided, we know that the OASDI tax could constitutionally have been imposed on federal judges at the same time it was imposed on other Americans. Judicial independence can be reached by a generally applicable, nondiscriminatory tax, and the OASDI tax could have been structured in a nondiscriminatory way. But the long shadow of Evans v. Gore perhaps helps to explain why federal judges were exempted from the OASDI tax when the Social Security Act was adopted: Evans strongly suggested that extending this new tax to sitting judges, like the extension of the income tax to the judiciary that was rejected in 1920, would have run afoul of the Compensation Clause. 26

Hatter seems to mean that after Congress forwent the opportunity to tax judges, it was stuck with that result. Already sitting judges were entitled to the benefit of the exemption for the rest of their judicial lives; taking the exemption away would have been discriminatory. That’s a difficult result to justify. In a very real sense, the Court was responsible for the exemption that it now says Congress couldn’t eliminate without affecting judicial independence.

III. Conclusion

The congressional taxing power is very broad, despite the specific limitations on that power contained on the Constitution. For many years, the Compensation Clause was considered such a limitation, and, in fact, the Supreme Court used the Clause in Hatter to strike down one exercise of the taxing power affecting the federal judiciary. But that specific result in Hatter is misleading. The real significance of Hatter is this: With the explicit (and long overdue) repudiation of Evans v. Gore, we should now be able to forget about the Compensation Clause as a limitation on the taxing power.

25Id. at 1795-96 (citations omitted).
26We understand that the Court continues to insist that the Compensation Clause serves a function in addition to furthering judicial independence: Evans properly added that these guarantees of compensation and life tenure exist, “not to benefit the judges,” but “as a limitation imposed in the public interest.” ... They “promote the public weal,”... in part by helping to induce “learned” men and women “to quit the lucrative pursuits” of the private sector,... but more importantly by helping to secure an independence of mind and spirit necessary if judges are “to maintain that nice adjustment between individual rights and governmental powers which constitutes political liberty....” Id. at 1791 (quoting Evans, 253 U.S. at 253, 248; 1 James Kent, Comments on American Law 294; and Woodrow Wilson, Constitutional Government in the United States 143 (1911)). We’ll have more to say about this Compensation-Clause-as-recruitment-perk rationale in another forum. Suffice it to say for present purposes that we don’t think that the Clause was originally intended to convince well-to-do lawyers to forgo their “lucrative pursuits” and, original understanding aside, we don’t want a federal bench made up of people who subordinate public service to the desire for economic gain. See also Entin and Jensen, supra note 2, at 1549.