

How rich is rich enough?

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

July 20, 2011

If you want a window into what has happened economically in the United States the last 30 years, [consider](#) the case of Dean Foods, a leading U.S. dairy company. In the 1970s CEO Kenneth J. Douglas earned what would be a \$1 million today. He lived well but not ostentatiously. Numerous times he turned down pay raises because he thought they were bad for the morale of the company's workers.

Today his successor earns ten times as much in compensation and lives an opulent life. Meanwhile, workers' wages at the company have been sliding. Some analysts observe that the social norms that discouraged big executive wages in the 1970s have changed. Now greed is good, and the people at the top deserve what they make. When it comes to wage inequality, the U.S. ranks alongside developing countries--ahead of Uganda and Jamaica but behind Cameroon and the Ivory Coast.

Doesn't there come a time when the wealthy think they have enough? How can they even spend it all? Scott Russell Sanders [asks](#) you to imagine how you'd spend a billion dollars if you kept it under your mattress and didn't earn any money off it. If you lived 50 years of adult life, you could spend \$1.7 million per month or \$55,000 per day. If you invested that money instead in U.S. Treasury bonds, at their current rate you could spend \$110,000 each day without touching the principle. (That amount happens to be a little more than twice the median household annual income in the United States.)

So why do some billionaires want even more? It isn't the money, says Sanders, it's the power they gain through the money.

Keep these anecdotes in mind as the federal government stalls in efforts to raise the debt ceiling because some politicians want to protect the wealthy and cut spending by reducing benefits in social programs.