

Uncle Sam Doesn't Need You

by Rev. Robert Edward Greene

On the first business day of 1996, January 2, A.T.&T. announced that it would lay off 40,000 of its employees -- perhaps 10,000 by attrition but at least 30,000 to be fired from their jobs. A.T.&T.'s stock immediately bounded up. The savings in wages clearly suggested, and the company meant it to assure, higher profits. That in turn means another improvement in the economy.

Meantime, A.T.&T's employees -- thousands of human beings -- are left hanging in the wind, wondering how long will they have an income, how long will they be able to pay their bills, how long will they be able to buy food for their families, how long before they lose their house because they no longer can make the mortgage payments, whether their children will be able to afford to attend college. Will they be one of the survivors, or will they be one of the 40,000 losers? A.T.&T. is in no rush to tell them: the company will let them know sometime between three months and three years.

A.T.&T. is not alone. Locally Spreckels Sugar just sold its sugar operations to a competitor, Holly Sugar. The consolidation -- the reduction in competition -- will cost 110 of our fellow San Joaquin County residents their jobs, plus another 100 more who worked seasonally and probably lived off unemployment benefits the rest of the year -- now they won't even be eligible for that!

Last Thursday, Apple Computer announced substantial losses in earnings. Apple is expected to alleviate the problem by announcing soon the layoffs of 3,000 people -- not human resources, as business likes to call them, but human beings!

Holiday layoffs have become the norm, reports Kirstin Downey Grimsley in the Washington Post. Layoffs in December make sense, say the economists: a company can start the new year off fresh. Sentiment cannot be allowed to offset the reality that layoffs almost inevitably increase stock values.

So 55,237 more Americans were relieved of their jobs, or more accurately of their livelihoods, this last December, according to a survey by Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. "Companies heretofore looked to the employee more empathetically," pronounces David Bowman, President of TTG Consultants. "Now they're looking more to the bottom line."

And that is the key to understanding the dichotomy of what really is happening in America today. Economists and politicians pronounce that the recession is over, that the economy is improving. What they mean is that people with money have more money. What they are talking about when they speak of the "economy" is wealth. Stock prices are at an all time high. Profits are up. People who benefit from investing money are gaining more money.

But that is altogether different from the human situation, from human well-being, from the human economy as opposed to the money economy. The human economy is a disaster and it is becoming increasingly more terrible month by month, year by year -- worse for

those laid off from their jobs; worse for those already poor; worse, too, for those becoming young adults.

For while the politicians in Washington, wholly cut off from the reality of living, insist that the solution to the welfare crisis is to force those on welfare to get jobs, the reality is that jobs in America consistently are being eliminated. Corporations are consolidating specifically so as to reduce costs by eliminating jobs. Companies are downsizing and are quite able to do so thanks to our new technologies. Government wants to reduce waste by cutting the size of the bureaucracy, which is nothing other than saying it wants to decrease the number of jobs available. The solution to the inadequacy of the social security trust fund is to increase the age of retirement, to keep older Americans working longer. But for every Americans over 65 who continues to work, there is one less job for an American under 65, as Franklin Roosevelt and his advisors realized when they came up with the notion of social security and retirement as a means for job creation.

It is not merely that current employees are losing their job. These are jobs being permanently eliminated. They no longer are available for anyone to fill. Devastating as is the loss of a job to these employees, the long term impact on the young is even worse: these are thousands of jobs not even available for them to seek.

Oh, yes, new jobs are being created. And some of them are well paid, highly skilled technological jobs. But the bulk of the new jobs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, are low-skill, low-paying service jobs. Meantime middle income jobs are just disappearing.

So let's not talk this morning about the unemployment rate. Let's talk instead about people -- the 7.6 million individual human beings who in July 1995 could not find a job. Let's talk about the 4.4 million individuals working part time, but who wanted, and could not find, full time jobs.

And don't think it will stop. Acknowledges Republican Presidential candidate Lamar Alexander speaking to voters in New Hampshire last week, "Ten percent of us every year are going to be losing our jobs. That's just a fact and we can't really stop that."

For the truth is that unlike the World War II posters, Uncle Sam doesn't need you any more!

But even having a job does not mean a decent living. 7 1/2 million Americans lived in households with a full-time, year round employee and still were living in poverty in 1993, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. They worked and they still could not provide a decent standard of living for their children. One out of every four children under the age of 16 lives in poverty in the United States of America.

More than half of all Americans who live in poverty --56% -- are not on welfare; they are members of working poor households. They worked, like they were supposed to and they are still poor in the world's richest nation! They just don't earn the \$7.49 an hour that is required to lift a family of four out of poverty, or the \$5.85 that will lift a family of three out of poverty. Earning the minimum wage of \$4.25 at a fast food restaurant or a textile plant won't get anybody out of poverty, unless they are single and living alone. Why should an American employer pay garment workers even the minimum wage when

illegal immigrants are happy to work at slave wages when where they came from life is even more desperate?

In fact U.S. District Judge Emmet Sullivan ruled on Wednesday, January 3, that the United States Government can require federal employees to work without pay because to rule otherwise would "create a crisis." Judge Sullivan sympathized with the workers, but "This court is responsible for the consequences of any order that it issues."

Until last week, I had thought that the 13th Amendment applied even to the United States Government -- that in the United States, except as punishment for a crime, no person, even a government employee, could be held in slavery or involuntary servitude. Yet I do not know how else to characterize requiring work without pay. How is this any different from the corvée of a feudal lord or the corvée of the Egyptian Pharaoh whom we criticize so greatly in the Book of Exodus?

Fortunately, our political leadership realized very quickly thereafter how badly this was playing in the hinterlands. So federal employees now are back to work with pay until January 26 when no doubt they again will be held liable for the inability of our representatives to adopt a budget.

The reason why our representatives cannot adopt a budget is that they live in a world of unreality. Politicians live in a world of money while we, their constituents, live in a world of humanity.

The economist, Robert J. Samuelson, in his new book, *The Good Life and Its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement 1945-1995*, explains that the problem really is not the government's but ours:

We had a grand vision. . . .In our new society, most workers would have rising incomes and stable jobs. Business cycles would disappear. Poverty, racism and crime would recede. Compassionate government would protect the poor, old and unlucky. We expected almost limitless personal freedom. We not only expected these things. After a while, we thought we were entitled to them as a matter of right.

But we were wrong. We had so such right. That vision of hope, security, justice, freedom was a "fantasy," says Samuelson. Capitalism doesn't work that way. Ups and downs; instability, insecurity, excesses; growth and decay; crime and racial conflicts; high incomes and poverty -- all are a permanent part of market capitalism and American society. The problem is not how things are; the problem lies in the promises that were made, in the vision of what should be. Now the failure of that vision is tearing Americans apart. Yet the truth is that there is nothing the government can do about it. That's capitalism. That is what capitalism requires. That is how capitalism functions.

And Samuelson is right: the vision is incompatible with capitalism. Where Samuelson is wrong is in the assumption that the vision must be wrong because capitalism is right. I propose just the opposite: that the vision is right and capitalism, by its failure, by its inability to fulfill that vision, is wrong -- just as wrong as every economic dogmatism, theory, and autocracy of the past which has refused to fulfill this human vision, this prophetic vision so long urged but which inevitably has been lost to selfishness and greed and profit and money and inhumanity. How much more reasonable it is to say that

if capitalism won't meet our hopes, our expectations, our human rights, it is capitalism that is wrong, it is capitalism that must go!

The reason that jobs are disappearing is simple enough: technological achievements are replacing the drudgery of human labor. We don't need as much labor to fulfill human needs. We don't need meter readers, bank tellers, switchboard operators, clericals. About 1.5 million full time workers are displaced every year as a result of technological development. Human beings actually are being freed by machines that now can do their work better and cheaper.

But they are not being freed. The savings that come from this replacement of labor is not being shared with the laborers. Instead the savings are turned into profits while the laborers are turned into the unemployed and the impoverished.

About three out of four of those replaced laborers will end up with lower incomes. The decline in income is accompanied by a drop in health insurance coverage and pension benefits for all workers and the less earned, the less likely they are to have those benefits.

The truth is that we have the resources to get rid of poverty. But to do so also means getting rid of great wealth. In other words, it means equality -- a word we revere as the very core of America and American democracy and yet which is despised in capitalism. In the twenty years from 1970 to 1990m the incomes of the richest 5% of Americans increased by 35.3% while the incomes of the poorest 20% of Americans increased by a mere 2.9% and the incomes of middle Americans -- that middle 20% -- increased by 13.9%. Over the last 20 years, reports Fortune Magazine, Fortune 500 companies laid off 8 million people -- roughly equivalent to the population of New York City -- while executive salaries increased by 1,000%!

Is it any wonder that the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow? Is it any wonder that the middle class is disappearing as income declines relative to the richer? Is it any wonder that the American standard of living cannot be preserved, while the wealthy accumulate more and more money, buy more and more politicians in increasingly expensive political campaigns, pay less and less to fewer and fewer ordinary American workers?

Observes Robert Samuelson, "money cannot transform human nature, nor neutralize all social upheavals." I suggest to you that human nature is the key to implementing the vision -- to actually achieving, in Samuelson's words, "The social glue that bound Americans together. . . -- when much else actually divided us -- . . .the common vision of our imagined future."

The key to economic equality is sharing -- the sharing of resources, the sharing of individual skills and talents and abilities, the sharing of the benefits reaped from our technological advances.

The key to eliminating the crime that places us in fear, eliminating the welfare that so concerns us, eliminating racism and separatism, lies in guaranteeing everyone a decent living and the assurance of those basic needs critical to human survival.

The key to decent living is that technology which has provided us at last with the

freedom and choice we never before enjoyed -- the capacity truly to respond to human need.

The key to our vision is an economy designed not to enrich but to serve human needs.

The fact of the matter is that there is no labor shortage. On the contrary there is an overabundance of labor. Unlike the World War II posters, Uncle Sam doesn't need you any more. America does not need so many workers.

The moment has come when we can grant people that which in truth is the most precious commodity in life -- their own time!; to free them from the slavery of unending work, to eliminate that tragic work ethic by which religion so has enslaved people, to replace it instead with an ethic of freedom -- free time to use as you want, the freedom to give of your skills and abilities as you will to others.

Freedom and equality no longer need to be a vision. They can be a reality. But they will be only when we are freed from the ropes that bind us -- freed from the lessons imposed upon us by wealth and power and the religion that becomes their tool, freed from archaic thinking. As the great prophet of our own day reminds us, "There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in the human will."

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