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Op-Ed Columnist

A Word, Mr. President

By **BOB HERBERT**

If I were a close adviser of President Obama's, I would say to him, "Mr. President, you have two urgent and overwhelming tasks in front of you: to put Americans trapped in this terrible employment crisis back to work and to put the brakes on your potentially disastrous plan to escalate the war in Afghanistan."

Reforming the chaotic and unfair health care system in the U.S. is an important issue. But in terms of pressing national priorities, the most important are the need to find solutions to a catastrophic employment environment that is devastating American families and to end the folly of an 8-year-old war that is both extremely debilitating and ultimately unwinnable.

We have spent the better part of a year locked in a tedious and unenlightening debate over health care while the jobless rate has steadily surged. It's now at 10.2 percent. Families struggling with job losses, home foreclosures and personal bankruptcies are falling out of the middle class like fruit through the bottom of a rotten basket. The jobless rate for men 16 years old and over is 11.4 percent. For blacks, it's a back-breaking 15.7 percent.

We need to readjust our focus. We're worried about Kabul when Detroit has gone down for the count.

I would tell the president that more and more Americans are questioning his priorities, including millions who went to the mat for him in last year's election. The biggest issue by far for most Americans is employment. The lack of jobs is fueling the nervousness, anxiety and full-blown anger that are becoming increasingly evident in the public at large.

Last Friday, a huge crowd of fans marched in a ticker-tape parade in downtown Manhattan to celebrate the Yankees' World Series championship. More than once, as the fans passed through the financial district, the crowd erupted in rhythmic, echoing chants of "Wall Street sucks! Wall Street sucks!"

I would tell the president that the feeling is widespread that his administration went too far with its bailouts of the financial industry, sending not just a badly needed lifeline but also unwarranted windfalls to the miscreants who nearly wrecked the entire economy. The government got very little in return. The perception now is that Wall Street is doing just fine while working people, whose taxes financed the bailouts, are walking the plank to economic oblivion.

I would also tell him that rebuilding the economy in a way that allows working Americans to flourish will require a sustained monumental effort, not just bits and pieces of legislation here and there. But such an effort will never get off the ground, will never have any chance of reaching critical mass and actually succeeding, as long as we insist on feeding young, healthy American men and women and endless American dollars into the relentless meat grinders of Afghanistan and Iraq.

We learned in the 1960s, when Lyndon Johnson's Great Society was trumped by Vietnam, that nation-building here at home is incompatible with the demands of war. We've managed to keep the worst of the carnage — and the staggering costs — of Iraq and Afghanistan well out of the

sight of most Americans, so the full extent of the terrible price we are paying is not widely understood.

The ultimate financial costs will be counted in the trillions. If you were to take a walk around one of the many military medical centers, like Landstuhl in Germany or Walter Reed in Washington, your heart would break at the sight of the heroic young men and women who have lost limbs (frequently more than one) or who are blind or paralyzed or horribly burned. Hundreds of thousands have suffered psychological wounds. Many have contemplated or tried suicide, and far too many have succeeded.

“Mr. President,” I would say, “we’ll never be right as a nation as long as we allow this to continue.”

The possibility of more troops for the war in Afghanistan was discussed Sunday on “Meet the Press.” Gov. Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania noted candidly that “our troops are tired and worn out.” More than 85 percent of the men and women in the Pennsylvania National Guard have already served in Iraq or Afghanistan. “Many of them have gone three or four times and they’re wasted,” said Mr. Rendell.

More troops? “Where are we going to find these troops?” the governor asked. “That’s what I want somebody to tell me.”

While we’re preparing to pour more resources into Afghanistan, the Economic Policy Institute is telling us that one in five American children is living in poverty, that nearly 35 percent of African-American children are living in poverty, and that the unemployment crisis is pushing us toward a point in the coming years where more than half of all black children in this country

will be poor.

“Mr. President,” I would say, “we need your help.”

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