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Hiding From Reality

By BOB HERBERT

However you want to define the American dream, there is not much of it that's left anymore.

Wherever you choose to look — at the economy and jobs, the public schools, the budget deficits, the nonstop warfare overseas — you'll see a country in sad shape. Standards of living are declining, and American parents increasingly believe that their children will inherit a very bad deal.

We're in denial about the extent of the rot in the system, and the effort that would be required to turn things around. It will likely take many years, perhaps a decade or more, to get employment back to a level at which one could fairly say the economy is thriving.

Consider this startling information from the Pew Hispanic Center: in the year following the official end of the Great Recession in June 2009, foreign-born workers in the U.S. gained 656,000 jobs while native-born workers lost 1.2 million. But even as the hiring of immigrants picked up during that period, those same workers "experienced a sharp decline in earnings."

What this shows is not that we should discriminate against foreign-born workers, but that the U.S. needs to develop a full-employment economy that provides jobs for all who want to work at pay that enables the workers and their families to enjoy a decent standard of living. In other words, a resurrection of the American dream.

Right now, nothing close to that is happening.

The human suffering in the years required to recover from the recession will continue to be immense. And that suffering will only be made worse if the nation embarks on a misguided crash program of deficit reduction that in the short term will undermine any recovery, and in the long term will make true deficit reduction that much harder to achieve.

The wreckage from the recession and the nation's mindlessly destructive policies in the years leading up to the recession is all around us. We still don't have the money to pay for the wars that we insist on fighting year after year. We have neither the will nor the common sense to either raise taxes to pay for the wars, or stop fighting them.

State and local governments, faced with fiscal nightmares, are reducing services, cutting their work forces, hacking away at health and pension benefits, and raising taxes and fees. So far it hasn't been enough, so there is more carnage to come. In many cases, the austerity measures are punishing some of the most vulnerable people, including children, the sick and the disabled.

For all the talk about the need to improve the public schools and get rid of incompetent teachers, school systems around the country are being hammered with dreadful cutbacks and teachers are being let go in droves, not because they are incompetent, but strictly for budget reasons. There was a time when the United States understood the importance of educating its young people and led the way in compulsory public schooling. It also built the finest higher education system in the world. Now, although no one will admit it publicly, we've decided to go in another direction.

In New York City, for example, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's choice to run the public school system is Cathleen Black, a wealthy corporate executive with no background in education whose children attended expensive private schools. Mr. Bloomberg has asserted that Ms. Black's management expertise will be a boon to the city's public school children. But the truth is that Ms. Black, if she gets a necessary waiver for her new job, will be presiding over budget cuts that can only hurt the schools. As

part of a proposed austerity budget, the mayor is planning to eliminate the jobs of thousands of public school teachers over the next two years. Take that, kids.

We've become a hapless, can't-do society, and it's, frankly, embarrassing. Public figures talk endlessly about "transformative changes" in public education, but the years go by and we see no such thing. Politicians across the spectrum insist that they are all about job creation while the employment situation in the real world remains beyond pathetic.

All we are good at is bulldozing money to the very wealthy. No wonder the country is in such a deep slide.

We don't even seem to realize how deep a hole we're in. If student test scores jumped a couple of points or the jobless rate fell by a point and half, the politicians and the news media would crow as if something great had been achieved. That's how people behave when they're in denial.

America will never get its act together until we recognize how much trouble we're really in, and how much effort and shared sacrifice is needed to stop the decline. Only then will we be able to begin resuscitating the dream.



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