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Misery With Plenty of Company

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Consider the extremes. President Obama is redesigning his administration to make it even friendlier toward big business and the megabanks, which is to say the rich, who flourish no matter what is going on with the economy in this country. (They flourish even when they're hard at work destroying the economy.) Meanwhile, we hear not a word — not so much as a peep — about the poor, whose ranks are spreading like a wildfire in a drought.

The politicians and the media behave as if the poor don't exist. But with jobs still absurdly scarce and the bottom falling out of the middle class, the poor are becoming an ever more significant and increasingly desperate segment of the population.

How do you imagine a family of four would live if its annual income was \$11,000 or less?

During a conversation I had this week with Peter Edelman, a professor at Georgetown University Law Center and a longtime expert on issues related to poverty, he pointed out that the number of people in that tragically dismal category has grown to more than 17 million. These are the folks trying to make it on incomes below half of the official poverty line, which is \$22,000 annually for a family of four.

No one talks about these families and individuals living in extreme poverty. Certainly not the Republicans who were having a dandy time this week deliberately misreading the Constitution and

promising budget cuts and other initiatives that will hurt the poor even more.

If you're still having trouble deciding whose side the Republicans are on, just keep in mind that the House G.O.P. bigwig Darrell Issa sent a letter to 150 businesses, trade groups and think tanks asking them to spell out which federal regulations they dislike the most. These are lifeguards on the side of the sharks.

Scared to death of being outdone, President Obama and his sidekicks climbed into their spiffy new G.O.P. costumes and promised in humiliatingly abject tones to shower the business world with whatever government largess they could lay their hands on. The first order of business (pun intended) was the announcement that William Daley, the Chicago wheeler-dealer and former Clinton administration official who landed a fat gig at JPMorgan Chase, would become the president's chief of staff. Mr. Daley was a loud critic of recent financial regulatory reforms and has been obsessed with getting Democrats to be more subservient to business.

The poor, who have been hurt more than anyone else in this recession, don't stand a heartbeat's chance in this political environment. The movers and shakers in government don't even give a thought to being on the side of the angels anymore — they're on the side of the millionaires and billionaires.

Nearly 44 million people were living in poverty in 2009, which was more than 14 percent of the American population and a jump of four million from the previous year. Anyone who thinks things are much better now is delirious. More than 15 million children are poor — one of every five kids in the United States. More than a quarter of all blacks and a similar percentage of Hispanics are poor.

Are we doing anything about this? No. Our government officials, from the president on down, are too busy kissing the bejeweled fingers of the megarich.

Professor Edelman broke the poor into two categories: the new poor, who have lost jobs and homes and otherwise been clobbered by the recession; and the old poor, who in many cases had previously been working, sometimes sporadically or part time, at jobs that didn't pay much. Many of those low-

paying jobs have since vanished and the old poor have just been crushed.

“There is this astonishing number of people all the way down there at the bottom that we just don’t talk about,” Mr. Edelman said, “and they’re in very big trouble.”

Welfare, even for the poorest of the poor, is not much help. More than 17 million people may be living in extreme poverty, but welfare, for most of the people who need it, was “reformed” right out of existence. TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), which is what welfare is called now, helps far fewer people than welfare used to, even though the poor have been laid low by the worst economy since the Depression.

Hardly anyone cares. Hardly anyone even notices.

With the tax cuts for the rich saved and William Daley coming on board, the atmosphere is being readied for Obama & Co. to tap the fat cats for the zillions necessary for next year’s re-election run. And that, of course, is the only thing that really matters.



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