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November 28, 2009

Op-Ed Columnist

Stacking the Deck Against Kids

By **BOB HERBERT**

Every year at Thanksgiving, parts of the Upper West Side of Manhattan become like a paradise for children. There's the exciting preparation of the balloons and floats for the Thanksgiving Day parade, and then, on Thursday morning, the parade itself.

The weather isn't always kind. I've seen the kids out there in snow, in freezing rain, in winds that threaten to send the balloons and their handlers soaring to distant venues. It doesn't seem to matter. The children come into the neighborhood in waves, holding the hands of adults or riding atop their shoulders, smiling, laughing, playing hide-and-seek among the police barricades. Finally, inevitably, they end up staring in absolute open-mouthed, wide-eyed awe as the mammoth, colorful helium-filled creations of their favorite characters begin making their majestic way down Central Park West.

We have an obligation and an opportunity at this special moment in history to do right by these youngsters, and all the rest of America's kids. It's a special moment because we've seen so clearly the many things that have gone haywire in the society, and while it may not be easy to articulate, we have a sense of what needs to be done.

The American economy is broken, ruined by the greed and irresponsibility of fabulously wealthy corporate chieftains and their shabby acolytes and enablers in government. While Wall

Street is handing out billions in bonuses, American families are struggling with joblessness, home foreclosures and rampant debt. The economic woes are exacting a fierce toll on family life, and children are taking a big hit — emotionally, psychologically and otherwise.

One effect of the Great Recession, according to a recent series in *The Times*, has been a big jump in the number of runaway children, many of them living in dangerous conditions on the street.

Family homelessness is also up, and poverty is increasing. More than a third of all black children in America are poor, and that tragic percentage is expanding. The outlook for America's working classes is bleak. A few weeks ago a New York cab driver nearly broke down in tears as he told me he'd had to apply for food stamps to continue feeding his family.

A sense of urgency may be starting to emerge. With President Obama's jobs summit approaching, representatives from labor and progressive organizations gathered in Washington to warn of the lasting damage being inflicted on the prospects of young Americans by the continuing employment crisis.

Millions of youngsters like those who were suffused with such delight at the Thanksgiving Day parade are being buffeted by an economy that is eroding their quality of life, curtailing their educational opportunities and undermining their prospects for economic success as adults. That more attention is not being paid to this growing disaster is criminal.

Groups represented at the meeting in Washington, which was sponsored by the Economic Policy Institute, included the A.F.L.-C.I.O., the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the N.A.A.C.P., the National Council of La Raza and the Center for Community Change. Among other things, they urged the administration and Congress to provide substantial additional relief to

economically distressed state and local governments, to invest in much more widespread infrastructure improvements, and to engage in some direct government creation of jobs.

All of that, in my view, would amount to just a first step. We remain stuck in an economic model that not only permits but encourages the continued existence of financial institutions that are too big to fail, which means that when one or more of them fail — as will surely happen at some point — we'll again be rushing to “save the system” by bailing them out at taxpayers' expense.

The system remains grotesquely unfair, with the deck stacked against working people, even as we're desperate to have them sustain the economy with nonstop consumer purchases. Keep in mind that at the start of the recession the collective wealth of the richest 1 percent of Americans was greater than that of the bottom 90 percent combined. The economic and political clout of that bottom 90 percent has only weakened since then.

We still have a hideously dysfunctional public education system, one that has mastered the art of manufacturing dropouts and functional illiterates. We have not even begun to turn that around.

We still keep fighting tragic, futile, stupid wars, squandering lives and resources and creative energies that could be put to use right here at home, where the need for nation-building is beyond critical.

The U.S. should be a paradise for young people. We need big changes in this country, approaches that are constructive, creative and fundamentally new, if we're going to give those smiling kids I saw on Thanksgiving Day the kind of society they deserve.

Gail Collins and Charles M. Blow are off today.

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