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**Op-Ed Columnist**

## **The Magic Potion**

**By [BOB HERBERT](#)**

With the marathon effort to overhaul the health care system behind us, it is time for the Obama administration to move quickly and powerfully to the monumental task of putting Americans back to work.

The just-say-no crowd will insist that we can't afford a real effort to revitalize employment, that budget deficits are too high, that the economy will recover without additional government stimulus, that the president has used up most of his political capital, and that there isn't much that government can do under any circumstances to create jobs.

Meanwhile, the United States is in real danger of sinking into a long-term economic funk. The recession is not over for the nearly 15 million people who are unemployed. Many of them have been out of work for longer than six months, a seeming eternity. Widespread joblessness and underemployment are threatening to become permanent features of the American landscape, corroding not just our standards of living but the very vibrancy of the American way of life.

Poverty and homelessness are increasing. More and more adult children, unable to find work, are living with their parents. The Times's Michael Luo [wrote in Monday's paper](#) about the increasing phenomenon of workers accepting jobs for which, in terms of their education and experience, they are considered overqualified.

Those who think some kind of robust recovery is hiding around the corner, just waiting to spring a pleasant surprise on us, are deluded. Too many families and individuals are tapped out. They're struggling from week to week and month to month just to meet the necessities of housing, food and energy costs. Those crazed, debt-driven buying sprees that held the economy aloft for so long are over.

Foreclosure notices went out to 2.8 million households last year and that figure is expected to top 3 million this year. Nearly 1 in every 4 homes with mortgages is "underwater," which means that the mortgage holder owes more on the property than it is worth.

You can't get back to a robust economy without putting Americans back to work. The economy needs to be rebuilt on a solid foundation of good jobs at good pay, and many of those jobs will have to come from thriving new industries. This is a long-term project that demands big-time government involvement. It will require the kind of commitment — over an even longer period of time — that President Obama and the Democrats in Congress gave to their health care initiative.

Franklin Roosevelt had it right in his first Inaugural Address when he declared, "Our greatest primary task is to put people to work." He underscored the urgency of the task when he said it should be treated "as we would treat the emergency of a war."

The administration and Congressional leaders have been touting some recent legislation as "jobs bills," but they are small-bore initiatives that will accomplish little. What is needed are bold new initiatives on several fronts. The federal government needs to do much more to help state and local governments that are in desperate fiscal straits because of falling tax revenues and are responding by laying off workers and cutting essential services.

A long-term program to rebuild the nation's infrastructure (which was only made worse by the harsh winter) would create jobs and establish a sound industrial platform for 21st-century industries.

The transformation to a greener economy needs to be accelerated, and most of the manufacturing associated with that newer, greener economy should take place in the United States. And some new variation of the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps should be developed to put economically distressed young people to work. What is happening to young, out-of-work and poorly educated American kids — not just in the big cities, but increasingly in suburban and rural areas, as well — is tragic.

The United States is a rich nation. To say that we cannot afford to do the things necessary to shore up the quality of our lives and establish a brighter future for coming generations is absurd. We always seem to have money for warfare and to bolster the interests of the monied classes.

As for the budget deficits, they will never be brought under control if Americans are not put back to work. Unemployment drives deficits by depriving the government of tax revenues and dramatically increasing the costs of safety-net programs and other public services. Putting Americans to work will ultimately make it much easier to begin bringing the deficits down.

The closest thing to a magic potion for individuals, families and the American economy is a job. F.D.R. understood that. The longer it takes for the rest of us to catch on, the deeper the long-term damage to the society will be.

