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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Reviving the Dream

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Working families were in deep trouble long before this megarecession hit. But too many of the public officials who should have been looking out for the middle class and the poor were part of the reckless and shockingly shortsighted alliance of conservatives and corporate leaders that rigged the economy in favor of the rich and ultimately brought it down completely.

As Jared Bernstein, now the chief economic adviser to Vice President Joseph Biden, wrote in the preface to his book, “Crunch: Why Do I Feel So Squeezed? (And Other Unsolved Economic Mysteries)”:

“Economics has been hijacked by the rich and powerful, and it has been forged into a tool that is being used against the rest of us.”

Working people were not just abandoned by big business and their ideological henchmen in government, they were exploited and humiliated. They were denied the productivity gains that should have rightfully accrued to them. They were treated ruthlessly whenever they tried to organize. They were never reasonably protected against the savage dislocations caused by revolutions in technology and global trade.

Working people were told that all of this was good for them, and whether out of ignorance or fear or prejudice or, as my grandfather might have said, damned foolishness, many bought into it. They signed onto tax policies that worked like a three-card monte game. And they were sold a snake oil concoction called “trickle down” that so addled their brains that they thought it was a wonderful idea to hand over their share of the nation’s wealth to those who were already fabulously rich.

America used to be better than this.

The seeds of today’s disaster were sown some 30 years ago. Looking at income patterns during that period, my former colleague at The Times, David Cay Johnston, noted that from 1980 (the year Ronald Reagan was elected) to 2005, the national economy, adjusted for inflation, more than doubled. (Because of population growth, the actual increase per capita was about 66 percent.)

But the average income for the vast majority of Americans actually declined during those years. The standard of living for the average family improved not because incomes grew but because women entered the workplace in droves.

As hard as it may be to believe, the peak income year for the bottom 90 percent of Americans was way back in 1973, when the average income per taxpayer, adjusted for inflation, was \$33,000. That was nearly \$4,000 higher, Mr. Johnston pointed out, than in 2005.

Men have done particularly poorly. Men who are now in their 30s — the prime age for raising families — earn less money than members of their fathers' generation did at the same age.

It may seem like ancient history, but in the first few decades following World War II, the United States, despite many serious flaws, established the model of a highly productive society that shared its prosperity widely and made investments that were geared toward a more prosperous, more fulfilling future.

The American dream was alive and well and seemingly unassailable. But somehow, following the oil shocks, the hyperinflation and other traumas of the 1970s, Americans allowed the right-wingers to get a toehold — and they began the serious work of smothering the dream.

Ronald Reagan saw Medicare as a giant step on the road to socialism. Newt Gingrich, apparently referring to the original fee-for-service version of Medicare, which was cherished by the elderly, cracked, "We don't get rid of it in Round One because we don't think it's politically smart."

The right-wingers were crafty: You smother the dream by crippling the programs that support it, by starving the government of money to pay for them, by funneling the government's revenues to the rich through tax cuts and other benefits, by looting the government the way gangsters loot legitimate businesses and then pleading poverty when it comes time to fund the services required by the people.

The anti-tax fanatic Grover Norquist summed the matter up nicely when he famously said, "Our goal is to shrink the government to the size where you can drown it in a bathtub." Only they didn't shrink the government, they enlarged it and turned its bounty over to the rich.

Now, with the economy in free fall and likely to get worse, Americans — despite their suffering — have an opportunity to reshape the society, and then to move it in a fairer, smarter and ultimately more productive direction. That is the only way to revive the dream, but it will take a long time and require great courage and sacrifice.

The right-wingers do not want that to happen, which is why they are rooting so hard for President Obama's initiatives to fail. They like the direction that the country took over the past 30 years. They'd love to do it all again.

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