

Hiding From Reality

© The New York Times , November 20, 2010

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 666,000 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.

By BOB HERBERT

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2010 The New York Times Company.
<http://www.nytimes.com>

Bring back the American Dream? It's not that hard

The Christian Science Monitor , July 17, 2012

Byline: Isabel Sawhill

Restoring opportunity in the United States is not terribly complicated. It will require an activist government and individual responsibility. That means a strong focus on job creation right now, combined with efforts to reduce debt, improve education, and strengthen families over the longer-run.

Success on these fronts is undermined not by a lack of knowledge about what to do, but by partisan arguments that ignore the kind of common-sense consensus that might otherwise prevail.

An update of my earlier work on economic mobility in the US, coauthored with Julia Isaacs and Ron Haskins and recently released by the Pew Charitable Trusts, confirms that there is less economic mobility in America than many believe, especially at the top and bottom of the distribution of income and wealth.

A child's chances of ending up in the middle class or above that level are more than twice as high for those born into an affluent family (the top 20 percent) as for those born in a poor family (the bottom 20 percent).

President Obama has given this issue prominent attention, especially in the speech he gave in Osawatimie, Kan., on Dec. 6 last year. He emphasized the importance of working hard and playing by the rules but stressed that those who do so should have a "fair shot" at the American Dream.

Former Gov. Mitt Romney's position is not terribly different, although, in deference to his more conservative base, he stresses the need for greater personal responsibility and playing by the rules as the best route to success in life.

In a speech at Liberty University on May 12, again citing Brookings research, he noted that the chance of achieving the American Dream is greatly enhanced if a person does just three things: finishes high school (at least), works full-time, and waits to have children until marriage. Those who do all three things have a 74 percent chance of joining the middle class.

These views are not all that different, and few people would disagree with the need for people to both play by the rules and live in a society that provides a fair shot at climbing the opportunity ladder.

What might this mean in practice? First, more support in the form of infrastructure spending and low taxes (at least for businesses and the middle class) to reduce unemployment in the short-term. Combine that with a grand bargain on the federal deficit for the longer term.

Second, continuing reforms of the education system involving expanded preschool, higher standards, greater accountability, better teachers, and more lifelong learning through community colleges and online learning.

Third, greater media attention and more government and philanthropic support for nongovernmental institutions that are trying to reduce an explosion of unplanned pregnancies and births to single women in their twenties. That surge has now made unwed childbearing the norm for women under 30, more than half of whom give birth out of wedlock.

This agenda, to be sure, barely scratches the surface of possible actions. But because it combines the values of liberals and conservatives alike and calls for both personal responsibility and responsible government policies, it has the potential to restore the kind of opportunity that Americans have long taken for granted as their birthright.

Presidential candidates and members of Congress, are you listening?

Isabel Sawhill is a budget and social policy expert. She co-directs the Budgeting for National Priorities project and the Center for Children and Families at The Brookings Institution. She served as an associate director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Clinton.

BY: Isabel Sawhill

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2012 The Christian Science Publishing Society.