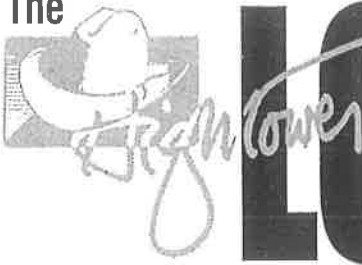


The



LOWDOWN

WRITTEN BY JIM HIGHTOWER ♦ PUBLISHER, PHILLIP FRAZER

True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.⁹⁹

—FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, State of the Union Address, 1944

The richest few among us have abandoned the many to a future of poverty

One in three Americans are now poor, sapping our nation's social, economic, and moral strength

POVERTY IN AMERICA: BIGGER THAN EVER AND RAPIDLY SPREADING. The flood of poor people in this Land of Plenty is being swollen by turbulent economic waters sweeping millions of Americans downstream from the middle class. This is our nation's true economic crisis. Unlike the manufactured "fiscal cliff" hysteria that continues to consume Washington politicians and pundits, the present pace of poverty really is dragging down our economy and our nation's potential for greatness. Equally important, it's dangerously stripping away the people's egalitarian belief that we're all in this together, that everyone is given a fair shot at a good life.

So where is the anti-poverty agenda? What do our stalwart solons propose to do about this genuine economic, social, democratic, and spiritual crisis that confronts us? "Nothing," snap Republican leaders, who simply blame the poor, claiming they lack initiative and family morals. Democrats care, but they're mostly playing defense, trying to swat down the meanest efforts to hurt the poor. They also oppose (though sometimes half-heartedly) more cuts to the tattered safety net that's supposed to catch those who fall between the cracks.

But society's moral imperative to extend a helping hand to "the least" among us, in Jesus' New Testament term, cannot be fulfilled merely with balm, food, and clothing. Rather, our major focus ought to be on the cracks themselves. **A populist perception: People fall between the cracks because there are cracks.**

More and more of them. You wouldn't put up with it in your home, nor should we let this structural damage spread through our national house. But there it is. While few in political office even want to discuss it, America's poverty numbers—including the already poor, the near poor, and those rapidly tumbling down—are disgraceful, made all the more so by the fact that we're living in the richest country in the world.

There is nothing "natural," inevitable, or inadvertent about this. For some 30 years, corporate and political powers have been deliberately, fiercely, and relentlessly battering the democratic pillars of our economy, creating a proliferation of cracks that have steadily crept into the center of our social structure. Then, in recent years, these power elites have turned their backs with calculated disregard as the cracks deepened into the very firmament of our economy, creating sinkholes that are not only swallowing "the least" of us, but most of us—including large chunks of America's middle class.



From the folds of its robe, it brought two children frightful and miserable. 'Spirit, are they yours?' asked Scrooge. 'They belong to all of us,' said the Spirit. —A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens

The count

The Census Bureau found that 31 million people lived beneath the poverty line in 2000. That was 11.3 percent of our people—bad enough. But in the next decade (spurred by the Bush-Cheney regime of wage-busting corporatists and Koch-headed ideologues in Congress), the percentage moved steadily up, reaching 15.1 percent in 2010, or more than 46 million of us—the highest number in the half-century the Bureau has been reporting poverty figures. This despite the fact that America's wealth grew astronomically in those

same 10 years (yes, there was the Wall Street crash of 2007-08, but the Great Recession it caused officially ended in mid-2009, and more wealth than ever quickly began to be generated. Yet in 2010, another 2.6 million of us plummeted into poverty).

IS THERE A COMMUNITY in America converting to total renewable energy, complete recycling, and a culture of conservation?

The wonky phrase for this elegant idea is “net zero,” and yes—it’s happening at an Army base, in Texas, no less! Astonishingly, America’s net zero future is being pioneered at Fort Bliss, a sprawling military base of 35,000 soldiers in El Paso.

The post already has a 1.4 megawatt solar array and has placed rooftop solar panels on all base housing (generating 13.4 megawatts of energy), and it’s in partnership with El Paso Electric to add a 200 acre, 20 megawatt solar farm by 2015. It also has a plan to convert waste from the post into energy; is engaged in wind power; geothermal and conservation projects; is promoting energy efficient vehicles; and is building bicycle lanes.

The Army! Who knew they cared?

Bliss’s rank and file soldiers, as well as the brass, are committed to achieving the goal of net zero by 2018, meaning the base will generate all of the energy it uses—and do it with renewables. Adding to the effort, the troops have planted nearly 15,000 trees and have become converts to recycling. To encourage the latter, base commander General Dana Pittard has put the million-dollar-a-year revenue from recycling into skating parks, exercise facilities, and other morale-boosting recreation projects.

“Everybody is getting involved,” he says, noting that the effort is changing behavior and fostering a conservation culture, which he hopes “our soldiers will then take with them when they go on.”

There’s hope for the Earth when even the Army begins to care, take action, and change attitudes.

This reality was politically awkward for the plutocrats, so their congress critters, lobbyists, and front groups insisted on a new reality. Claiming that the official poverty stats were out of whack, they demanded that such non-cash benefits for poor people as food stamps, child tax credits, and school lunches be counted as income for them, thus statistically shrinking the number of folks who would be counted as poor. In a classic case of “be careful what you wish for” however, the Census tallyers agreed to include those non-cash benefits—BUT, they also decided it was time to factor in previously ignored costs that whack the poor, including ever-growing outlays for health care, housing, taxes, utilities, commuting, and child care.

Using this more accurate “supplemental poverty measure,” the 2010 count was re-done and, sure enough, the old number was wrong. Instead of 46.2 million poor Americans, the recalibrated formula showed that 49.1 million of us were below the line that year—16.1 percent of our population.

The Bureau has since also completed its poverty computations for 2011, again using the improved method for the tally. Voilà—the ranks of the poor grew by another 600,000 of our fellow citizens that year, led by a spike in the number of working people who had been reduced to poverty wages. Included in this latest official count are 18.1 percent of America’s children and 15.5 percent of all working adults.

The forces shoving down the incomes of the great majority in our country are not abating, so the deluge of new inductees into poverty continues. Already, the USofA has crossed an embarrassing threshold of economic infamy: *50 million poor people*. “Poor” means they are trying to make ends meet on \$11,000 or less a year for an individual, \$15,000 a year for a single mom with one child, and \$23,000 for a family of four. Fifty million Americans! That’s literally a nation of poverty in our midst—roughly equivalent to the entire population of South Korea.

Then add 51 million additional Americans classified as “near poor”—an individual, for example, making between \$11,000 and \$17,000 a year (perhaps one of the “associates” stocking shelves at your local Walmart or serving you at Pizza Hut). In all, more than 100 million of our people—one out of three of us—are either poor or perched precariously on the brink of that abyss. By the way, more than half of today’s near poor landed there from higher income levels—people who had a better paying job that was moved offshore or downsized, uninsured families suddenly zapped by a major medical cost, or recent college grads saddled with debt and unable to find a higher-paying job in the field of their degree, so now they’re plopped behind a

car rental counter or espresso machine and paid a near-poverty wage.

Abandoning the poor

With so many Americans caught in the hellish vortex of low wages, joblessness, and poverty, you might assume that our leaders would respond with an urgent effort to lift them up—not out of compassion, but out of respect for what they could be contributing. In other words, just as the poor need us, *we need them*—our society urgently needs the intellect, creativity, and productivity those millions have within them.

But that would require actual leadership. Instead, those in power today are responding with a toxic blend of ignorance, indifference, contempt, and bullsh*t. For instance, ponder the thinking of André Bauer, South Carolina’s former lieutenant governor. In 2010, he shared this uplifting ethic, supposedly taught by grandmother: “She told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You’re facilitating the problem if you give an animal or person ample food supply... You’ve got to curtail that type of behavior.”

Call André an ick, but he’s only mouthing the collective wisdom of today’s far-right Republican Party. Indeed, this year, the party is unabashedly and aggressively espousing a policy of curtailing the eating behavior of low-income human animals. In particular it’s working to gut the enormously successful food stamp program, claiming that it’s an out-of-control government entitlement that is neither affordable nor needed. Rupert Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal* went after it in a March article bearing this headline: “Use of Food Stamps Swells Even as Economy Improves.” Hey, who needs food stamps in good times?

Can Rupert even spell o-b-t-u-s-e? As *The Atlantic* magazine’s Jordan Weissman wrote, “Repeat after me: There are record numbers of Americans on food stamps today because there are record numbers of Americans in poverty.”

Still, such boneheads as the GOP’s budget sorcerer, Paul Ryan, are out to shred food stamps: His “budget blueprint,” adopted by the House in March would cut \$125 billion (and 13 million poor people—nearly half of them children) out of the program during the next five years.

This is only one piece of an insidious agenda of abject austerity being pushed in Washington, on Wall Street, in the corporate media, and in many state capitals—a cold demand that governments abandon the poor. The pushers are the usual cabal of 1-percenters who view themselves as “the creators” and everyone else as moochers.

Through PR campaigns, hoked-up “studies” by for-

DoSomething!

Many groups spend much time and effort fighting on behalf of America’s poor, working poor, and middle class. Whether it’s research or grassroots activism, these are just some of the groups doing the heavy lifting for basic economic fairness for all Americans.

- **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities** www.cbpp.org (202) 408-1080
- **Center for Community Change** www.communitychange.org (202) 339-9300
- **Children’s Defense Fund** www.childrensdefense.org (800) 233-1200

- **Economic Policy Institute** www.epi.org (202) 775-8810
- **Institute for Policy Studies** www.ips-dc.org (202) 234-9382
- **Jobs With Justice** www.jwj.org (202) 393-1044
- **Results** www.results.org (202) 783-7100
- **Working America** www.workingamerica.org (202) 637-5137

hire academics, targeted outlays of political donations, and various voodoo incantations, those austerians have been able in the last couple of years to fabricate a climate of crisis—almost a panic—over government deficits. They screech in unison that the sky is falling, that America faces imminent financial ruin unless federal and state budgets are balanced, pronto.

The place to start, declared the “deficit scolds” (as they were dubbed by *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, who has been a splendid and tenacious debunker of their doomsday cries) is with those “wasteful” welfare programs that “entrap” the poor in an “immoral” dependency on government “largesse.” No less of a social scholar than Newt Gingrich has offered a specific example of the austere Dickensian utopia that the plutocrats envision for poor people: “It is tragic what we do in the poorest neighborhoods, entrapping children in child [labor] laws which are truly stupid,” he clucked in 2011. “These schools should get rid of unionized janitors, have one master janitor, pay local students to come take care of the school.”

Right-wing governors in Wisconsin, Ohio, Maine, Florida, Indiana, Arizona, Texas, and elsewhere have gleefully embraced the austerity flimflam, using it as a cudgel not only to bust unionized janitors, but also to crush all public employee unions and eliminate hundreds of thousands of good jobs.

Meanwhile, Ryan’s budget bludgeoners and such goofball governors as Rick “Oops” Perry have teamed up to hammer Medicaid, leaving millions of low-income Americans (about 75 percent of them children) without the basic human right of a civilized society: Health care. Also, tens of thousands of children have already been cut from Head Start; untold numbers of homebound seniors had to be dropped by Meals on Wheels; and hundreds of thousands of low-income veterans (many of them homeless) have had their housing, tuition, job-training, and suicide-prevention assistance eliminated.

Abandoning America’s most vulnerable people in a time of both rising poverty for the many and rising wealth for the few is economically stupid, socially destructive, and utterly immoral. And to assert that such shameful austerity is necessary for the nation’s economic health is a lie. In fact, even Wall Street analysts are now alarmed over the damage being done by the austerians. One leading financial firm reports that extreme budget cutting “has detracted from growth in

five of the past seven quarters,” while also adding at least a percentage point (more than two million people) to the ranks of the unemployed.

Punishing the poor

It’s said that poverty is its own punishment, but that’s not harsh enough for Scroogians who view those in need of a helping hand as failed humans who must not be coddled, but chastened by both government and corporate forces.

Indeed, In Dickens’ classic Christmas novel, old Ebenezer was the perfect personification of 19th century England’s nasty rich. Asked to make a charitable donation to aid the poor, he curled his lip in contempt and snarled: “Are there no prisons?”

Ah, the old days. But wait—Scrooge lives! Right here in the USA of 2013, debtors’ prisons are back. A third of our states presently allow collection agencies to sue and local judges to jail people who’re too broke to make a credit card payment or pony up the cash for a traffic fine, etc.

This is happening to thousands of poor Americans, even though the Supreme Court ruled in 1983 that it’s unconstitutional to imprison people solely because they’re unable to pay such fines. In April, ACLU of Ohio issued a chilling report documenting this outrage. Titled “The Outskirts of Hope,” it found that municipal courts across that state are routinely wasting taxpayer dollars and ruining lives by repeatedly (and illegally) jailing debtors who owe only a few hundred bucks, but are out of work, out of money, and out of hope (read it at www.aclu.org/blog/criminal-law-reform/outskirts-hope-how-ohios-debtors-prisons-are-ruining-lives-and-costing).

Making it far worse, many states have privatized the supervision of misdemeanor offenders—and these corporate enforcers can really put the mean in misdemeanor. In Georgia, for example, not only must debtors scrape up cash to pay their fines, but the probation corporation hits them with at least \$35 a month in supervisor fees. The system is a trap—an impoverished debtor might finally be able to pay off a \$600 fine to the court, but then owes \$650 to cover corporate fees. Can’t pay? Go back to the judge, be assessed another fine, then get turned over again to the probation company to rack up more fees.

Right-wing lawmakers seem to have a sociopathic compulsion to pile on the poor. For example:

CORPORATE BOSSES ARE THE RADICALS

“OUTSIDE RADICAL GROUPS!” squawked Rep. Scott Garrett at a recent Republican inquisition into a citizens’ petition presented to the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Garrett is foaming at the mouth on behalf of corporate chieftains who’re pouring unlimited (and untold) amounts of their shareholders’ money into our elections. More than 500,000 citizens signed this petition asserting that shareholders have a right to be told how much of their money is being spent on behalf of which candidates.

Who are these scary citizens, considered such a threat to corporate power that a Congress critter is tarring them publicly as outside radicals? They’re professors from leading law schools, state and national elected officials, pension fund directors, public interest advocates, and corporate shareholders. Not exactly outsiders, much less radicals.

And that’s what makes them so dangerous to the autocratic elites who run corporations as their own fiefdoms. Top executives want no accountability for the hundreds-of-millions of shareholder dollars they’re spending to elect corporate lickspittles like Garrett. Don’t question us, they demand, just trust us.

Uh... no. Far from earning trust, they’ve already wrecked our economy and betrayed our nation’s egalitarian ideals. Now they want free reign to pervert America’s democratic process with clandestine election campaigns secretly financed with other people’s money.

These kleptocrats are the real radicals. Public Citizen is leading an effort to disclose their thievery, and ultimately to outlaw it, and return elections to the people. Check it out at www.citizen.org.

The LOWDOWN

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HOW BAD IS THE JOBS CRISIS?

"STOCK MARKET SOARS," exulted a typical headline in early May, when the Dow Jones average topped 15,000.

But this index of Wall Street wealth doesn't measure our nation's true economic health. Yes, the privileged few are doing extremely well. But the workaday many are falling further behind as the jobs market sinks from recession down into depression.

The monthly unemployment reports don't tell the depths of misery out here in the real world, beyond the view of Wall Street and Washington elites. For example, President Obama hailed the news that unemployment dipped to 7.5 percent in April. Unstated, though, was the stark reality that this good-news dip was not due to a jump in job offerings, but to a bad-news labor market so weak and discouraging that Americans are dropping out of it or never entering it.

More than a third of our working age population is no longer even in the job market, and only 58.6 percent of us are employed. Put the opposite way, 41 percent of the potential workforce is not working—about 102 million people. One more chiller statistic: More than one out of five American families report that, last year, not a single family member had a job.

This lack of jobs is sucking the economic vitality out of our nation, but our leaders refuse to acknowledge it. In fact, corporate chieftains deliberately exacerbate the crisis by hoarding trillions of dollars that ought to be rushed into job-creating expansions, and politicians add to the casualties by gleefully firing hundreds of thousands of teachers, firefighters, police, and other valuable public employees.

America's middle class is burning to the ground, while Washington fiddles with nonsense and Wall Street feathers its own nest.

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ONE IN THREE AMERICANS ARE NOW POOR, SAPPING OUR NATION'S SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND MORAL STRENGTH

Let's join the Army.....	2
Corporate bosses are the radicals.....	3
How bad is the jobs crisis?.....	4

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PERIODICALS



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■ **Tennessee State Representative Stacey Campfield** proposed this year that parents on temporary welfare assistance be punished if their children are struggling in school. A child's failure to make "satisfactory progress," the bill decreed, would result in a 30 percent cut in that needy family's \$185-a-month payment (second lowest in the nation). So, learn kids—or Mommy will feel the lash of the state! Campfield rejected arguments that his proposal would put an unfair burden on people already burdened with poverty. After all, he explained, parents could have the family's benefits restored by simply hiring a tutor for their children. Even his fellow GOPers gagged on that, so he was forced to pull the bill.

■ **Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst** and Governor Perry pushed a new welfare law this year, with Dewhurst declaring: "It is a legitimate function of government to help people who are not able to help themselves." However, these two peacocking, right-wing millionaires were not offering a helping hand to the needy, but a gratuitous slap. Every Texan who applies for unemployment benefits or welfare payments, demanded these "small government" poseurs, should be forced to pee-in-the-cup for drug testing. This is shameful piss-on-the-poor grandstanding. Drug-testing for benefits has proven to be a total waste of taxpayer funds (beneficiaries actually have a much lower rate of drug use than the general public). But, spread by the Koch-funded American Legislative Exchange Council. (See *Lowdown*, June 2011), such gestures of spite are the latest right-wing fad, having been submitted in some three dozen states.

■ **On the other hand**, the far right does want to give something to the poor: A tax increase. Perry, Mitt Romney, Michele Bachmann, and other prominent Repubs express dismay that the bulk of the poor and near poor pay no income tax. Hello: LOW INCOME PEOPLE HAVE LOW INCOMES—too low to reach the threshold for owing federal income taxes.

Austerity's dead end

Who are we? As a nation, as a people—how do our actions (as opposed to our ideals) define us?

A society's response to poverty is one measure

that speaks directly to its essential character. In particular, a *wealthy* society's nonchalant tolerance of poverty in its midst, the willingness of that society's leaders to disregard the spread of poverty, and the callous calculations by some that it is permissible and even profitable to denigrate those mired in poverty—these are three flashing indicators of a meltdown in our society's moral core.

Consider an especially disturbing gambit by today's extreme, plutocratic right. They mock America's poor by spreading the canard that our country only has a kind of pseudo-poverty that really amounts to abundance. "Look at 'em," goes this line of attack. "Many of them have refrigerators. Even cell phones. Plus, they're not emaciated, they're fat!"

Anyone who's ever been close to poverty knows how obscenely wrong (both as fact and as a tactic) such a perverse portrayal is. Up-by-the-bootstraps mythmaking aside, being poor in America, as one who has been there puts it, is "soul destroying, grinding, and cruel."

In a *New York Times* column last month, Dr. Perri Klass, a pediatrician, wrote about the rise of childhood poverty in our nation. It's not a matter of a few cases here and there, she pointed out, but a deepening crisis that's an affront to the egalitarian opportunity that America has long stood for, as well as an explosive long-term threat to our social cohesiveness: "Children are now our poorest group," Dr. Klass writes, "with almost 25 percent of children under age five living below the federal poverty level."

As pediatricians know from the reality they confront in their exam rooms, income matters. "Poverty damages children's dispositions and blunts their brains," reports Dr. Klass, and it defines "many children's life trajectories in the harshest terms: Poor academic achievement, high dropout rates, and health problems from obesity and diabetes to... substance abuse and mental illness."

A past president of the American Academy of Pediatrics adds that, "after the first three, four, five years of life, if you have neglected that child's brain development, you can't go back."

Yet, Washington rushes to coddle billionaires while cutting budgets that invest in children. That's Austerity Street's dead end, and while it seems to define our leaders, I don't believe it's who we are. Is it?