

Obama on the Backs of the Poor

Exclusive: The painful resolution of the debt-ceiling crisis shows that Republicans and the Right know how to play hardball and that the Democrats and President Barack Obama know how to get rolled. Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern is thinking about other options.

By Ray McGovern

What are we to make of the Obama-brokered deal on debt and spending? It was certainly what the Germans call *eine schwere Geburt* (a difficult birth); it was one of the few times I would have favored abortion.

I am reminded of a sermon that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave during the turbulent 1950s, in which he peered into the future and issued a prescient warning:

“A nation or a civilization that continues to produce soft-minded men purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan.”

In promoting and then signing the so-called “deficit reduction” legislation, President Barack Obama has definitively confirmed that he stands in the ranks of those spiritual-death-dealing, “soft-minded” men about whom Dr. King warned so ominously.

In my view, even dyed-in-the-wool Obama supporters will now have to let the scales fall from their eyes. The new one-sided “compromise” so clearly promotes the interests of the wealthy over those of the poor that, in Biblical terms, it can readily be seen as a Goddamned deal.

I want to share some thoughts with those among us, believers and non-believers alike, who shudder at the prospect of our children and children’s children inheriting a country far different from the one promised by the American Dream, a nation approaching “spiritual death.”

If you are not greatly concerned with the growing disparity between the rich and poor in this country, take another minute to ponder another warning from Dr. King in the same sermon:

“Passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby to become a participant in its evil.”

It is a bitter pill and a great disappointment that the President has turned his back on those about whom the Hebrew and Christian scriptures express the deepest concern, the *anawim*. This frequently used Biblical word denotes not just those

on the margins, but the despised, hated, poor, often said in Scripture to include the widows, the orphans, the strangers.

My atheist friends regularly remind me to widen my perspective. The scriptural mandate to care for the widows, the orphans and the strangers springs from the highest of human instincts, and neither requires nor presupposes a faith perspective.

In modern American history, it also has been shown that having a vibrant middle class is good for business, while a society of a few rich and many poor is prone to destructive boom-and-bust cycles.

A huge majority of economists concede that America has been sliding into a land of haves and have-nots for the past several decades and that the "deal" Obama signed into law on Tuesday will do little, if anything, to improve the lives of our fellow citizens deprived of work, shelter, medical care and other necessities.

In sum, Obama again put in a corner by Republicans who appeared ready to force the United States into default if they didn't get their way reneged on a promise not to let the burden for coping with the economic/fiscal mess fall primarily on the backs of the poor.

The immediate deficit-cutting plan excludes any additional tax revenues from the rich, a line in the sand drawn by Republicans who were determined to protect even an extravagant tax loophole for corporate jet owners and special tax breaks for oil companies recording record profits.

And Republican leaders have made clear that they will be equally adamant against any new tax revenue from the recommendations of a special congressional committee, meaning that the United States will soon face another budget crisis in which the Republicans will demand even deeper spending cuts.

Demons and Scripture

Scripture contains a lot of stories about demons. These texts were always a stretch for me, until I found myself investigating my country's use of kidnapping, torture and black-site prisons, not to mention targeted assassinations. No longer could I make light of the demonic.

Lessons from the various indignities visited on many of my friends in inner-city Washington have served as confirmation. Ex-offenders are especially prominent among the anawim of our nation's capital.

If we are to follow Dr. King's mandate to avoid participation in unjust systems

and practices inevitably exacerbated by the legislation signed by the President on Tuesday, we need to decide how to react. Ideally, we will choose to move forward in a wide, justice-and-peace oriented community.

From what is known of Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor in Chicago, and the United Church of Christ's reputation for faithfulness to Hebrew as well as Christian scripture, it is a safe bet that the social gospel was preached again and again in the hearing of an attentive Obama.

There is no way he could have escaped the insight that the ancient Hebrew concept of social justice was something that many in the U.S. power elite today would decry as an un-American activity.

This Hebrew concept of justice, which Jesus strongly embraced, challenges modern America and its economic inequality at almost every turn.

Take, for example, the Biblical concept of the Jubilee Year, which mandated widespread redistribution of wealth every 50 years. (See what I mean about "un-American?")

I think we can assume that, if Obama were paying attention, he would have assimilated the starkly countercultural Hebrew concept of the Jubilee Year, an inspiration that rejected the idea of accumulated wealth and the outsized power that goes with it.

The Bible was dead serious about the redistribution of wealth. The Jewish sense was that, over time, the community would inevitably see immoderate wealth and immoderate poverty co-existing.

In other words, it was a given, for a whole bunch of very human reasons, that there would be mal-distribution of wealth, and the concept of Jubilee was to squash it all back down, essentially requiring everyone to return to the same starting point every 50 years as a matter of law.

Granted, it was a primitive idea for a simple economy, but the Jubilee spirit was the spirit of the God of the Hebrews who insisted time and again through the Biblical writers and prophets "there shall be no poor among you." And for that to happen, there had to be periodic sharing of wealth.

It would be perhaps too much to expect that President Obama would have broached something along these lines to House Speaker John Boehner.

Still, would it have been too much a stretch to expect some mutual concern from Republicans and Democrats alike over the growing disparity between rich and poor in this country?

Boehner is fond of advertising that he is a Catholic. Me too.

The House speaker is a little younger than I am, but I would be surprised if he had not learned that the first thing Jesus of Nazareth said in his inaugural speech was that he had come to “bring good news to the poor.” There was only bad news for the poor from the debt-limit “compromise.”

Chastened by the Right

In Obama’s public appearances, there have been a few times when he showed some sensitivity to the problem of an extreme accumulation of wealth at the top.

Remember campaigner Obama’s brief chat with Joe (the Plumber) Wurzelbacher in Toledo, Ohio, on Oct. 12, 2008.

“My attitude is that if the economy’s good for folks from the bottom up, it’s gonna be good for everybody,” Obama said. “I think when you spread the wealth around, it’s good for everybody.”

The Republicans and the right-wing news media pounced on the comment, accusing Obama of running for “redistributionist in chief.”

Fox News played up the following snide statement from a spokesman for John McCain: “If Barack Obama’s goal as President is to ‘spread the wealth around,’ perhaps his unconditional meetings with Hugo Chavez, Raul Castro, and Kim Jong-Il aren’t so crazy, if nothing else, they can advise an Obama administration on economic policy.”

A chastened Obama quickly learned his lesson. Since the “Joe the Plumber” incident, Obama has avoided any clear suggestion that he sees a benefit in a more equitable sharing of wealth.

On Feb. 7, 2011, the President volunteered to undergo a TV grilling by Fox’s Bill O’Reilly prior to the Super Bowl and was prepared for O’Reilly’s when-did-you-stop-beating-your-wife-type question on the topic:

“Do you deny that you’re a man who wants to redistribute wealth?” asked O’Reilly.

“Absolutely. Absolutely,” Obama responded.

O’Reilly himself is an interesting case study. A graduate of Catholic grammar and high schools on Long Island, he in 1971 earned a B.A. in history from Marist College, which was founded by the Catholic order of Marist Brothers in Poughkeepsie, New York. He then taught briefly in a Catholic high school.

There is no indication that anywhere along the line anyone told him of the Jubilee Year concept, or even that Jesus of Nazareth said he would be, and his followers should be, "good news for the poor. "

Fox has been very good news for O'Reilly; Wikipedia records his annual salary at \$20,000,000.

Given how Obama facilitated "resolving" the manufactured crisis over raising the debt ceiling and other fiscal measures, he seems determined to prove his declaration to O'Reilly.

Backs of the Poor

At a Town Hall meeting at Facebook headquarters in Palo Alto, California, on April 20, the President inadvertently (and ironically) gave a hint regarding how easy it would be to do what he actually ended up doing even while criticizing Republican attitude of neglect of the poor.

Here's what Obama said to applause from the well-heeled folks at Facebook: "Nothing is easier than solving a problem on the backs of people who are poor, for people who are powerless and don't have lobbyists or don't have clout."

Then, to avoid an unprecedented default on the payment of U.S. debts, Obama ultimately opted for this "easier" course of action, exempting the wealthy and corporations from pitching in to solve the debt problem and bowing to Republican demands that everything come from spending cuts.

The outcome of the debt-ceiling battle has left many disillusioned Democrats and progressives now certain that it's foolhardy to expect Obama to behave any differently, even though he continues to promise a vigorous debate on the proper role of government in American society but then never delivers.

That means the next course of action for Americans who want a different outcome may be to knock on the doors of rectories, synagogues and mosques to see if there's anyone home and if anyone cares about what is happening to those on the margins.

Ask if these religious leaders are aware of what happened in Germany during the Thirties, when Catholic and Lutheran church leaders could not find their voice, and ended up acting as a force of stability for a fascist regime. See if it's possible to wake anyone up in the religious institutions tied to the Establishment.

Inform other citizens that 58 cents of every dollar in federal "discretionary spending" now go to the Pentagon. It might be worth noting that the Soviet Union

America's "great enemy" imploded 20 years ago. Despite the lack of a threat from a major power, the U.S. military spending equals that of all the other countries of the world put together.

It's also worth recalling President Dwight Eisenhower's famous warning about "the military-industrial complex" and the words of Gen. Douglas MacArthur ten years earlier. (Neither of these military men was exactly a "dove.")

On May 15, 1951, MacArthur said: "It is part of the general pattern of misguided policy that our country is now geared to an arms economy which was bred in an artificially induced psychosis of war hysteria and nurtured upon an incessant propaganda of fear."

Since the Obama administration and Congress cannot be counted on to pursue traditional American justice (not to mention Biblical Jubilee justice) toward the poor and since American religious institutions mostly are riding shotgun for this inequitable system we might do well to heed the admonitions of popular theologian Annie Dillard; Cesar Chavez, co-founder of the United Farm Workers; and Mario Savio of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of the 60s:

Dillard: "There is only us; there never has been any other."

Chavez: "There are already enough of us. But without action, nothing is going to happen."

Savio: " There comes a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even passively take part; and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop."

Some Americans plan to express their repudiation of the dysfunctional political system with a U.S. version of "Tahrir Square" beginning Oct. 6, the tenth anniversary of the U.S. attack on Afghanistan. (See: <http://october2011.org/statement.>)

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