

Real Plans for Putting People to Work

Ironically, just as government-spurred technology opened up prospects of greater wealth for all, an anti-government movement took hold, making sure most benefits went to the rich while leaving millions unemployed and the economy a wreck. Michael Winship lists ideas for putting some jobless back to work.

By Michael Winship

I like to ask friends about the oddest summer job they ever had.

One talks about how he used to don a rubber suit every morning at a Sylvania electronics plant in Syracuse, New York, and climb into a tank, where he dipped television tubes into some sort of mercury solution. He now moonlights as a thermometer.

Another spent a summer walking from floor to floor of a Manhattan skyscraper. His job was to take a long stick and un-jam the mail chute that ran alongside the elevator banks from the highest floor of the building to the bottom.

When he reached the basement, he took the elevator back to the top and started all over again, a Sisyphean postman.

A third worked in a factory that canned orange juice concentrate. In the process of filtering for impurities, the pulp was removed from the juice.

But lots of people insisted on the authentic taste and texture of pulp in their o.j., so my friend's job was to sit with an ice pick and an enormous frozen block of pulp. As cans of concentrate came by on a conveyor belt, he'd chip off a bit and throw it in.

Much of that kind of summer work doesn't exist these days for teenagers or anyone else, not only because of our snail-like jobless recovery, but also the simple reality that technology has kissed goodbye to so many of our relatively mindless, rote occupations.

My first college summer job was working at *The New Republic* magazine, where I was in charge of compiling the publication's semi-annual index, a deadly duty that required a typewriter and piles of index cards on which were noted subjects, authors, dates, etc.

I then spent several days taping them onto long sheets of legal paper which were shipped off to the printer. My first published work.

Today, computers compile and collate that kind of data in nanoseconds. Good for

them and us, I guess, but at least it was a job when I needed one.

Technology, outsourcing, the colossal economic meltdown of 2008 – according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in June, there were 4.5 out-of-work men and women for every available job.

That's down slightly from 4.6 to 1 in May, but "still extremely high," reported Heidi Shierholz of the progressive Economic Policy Institute. "June marks two-and-a-half years straight that the job seeker's ratio has been substantially above 4-to-1... [That means] for three out of four unemployed workers, there are simply no jobs."

She continues, "Unfortunately, instead of helping the unemployment situation, the debt ceiling deal will slow growth and make joblessness worse."

Gene Robinson of *The Washington Post* concurs and adds: "The Republican solution has been to eliminate jobs rather than create them. Last month, the economy added 117,000 jobs – a performance so weak that unemployment changed little.

"The private sector actually added 154,000 jobs, but the public sector lost 37,000 jobs as Republicans continue to impose an austerity program at an inopportune moment."

Republican House members even oppose House Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson's proposal to set up a joint select committee on job creation, with representatives from both parties, similar to the new, debt deal super-committee that's supposed to carve at least \$1.2 trillion out of the deficit.

(Hard to believe Capitol Hill could ever resist creating yet another committee but go figure.)

Speaker John Boehner's spokesman says it "sounds like a scheme for more of the same failed 'stimulus' government spending," but as Gene Robinson noted, "The GOP seems to believe that a federal, state or local job somehow isn't a 'real' job. I'll bet most Americans know otherwise."

Because there actually are lots of solid proposals beyond the Republicans' broken record of more tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, deregulation and continued exploitation of fossil fuels – "their mantra," as Wall Street exec and former Treasury official Steven Rattner writes, of "repeal and retrenchment, devoid of new initiatives or a positive agenda."

There are jobs to be had, jobs for the creating, even good ones, if Washington can just pull its head out of ... the hole it's dug for itself.

But just as a starting point of reference, for all the GOP denigration of TARP,

actions by the Federal Reserve and the Obama stimulus, according to a recent report issued by the non-partisan policy group Demos, "It's important to remember that we dodged a far more lethal bullet.

"The Great Recession could have turned into another Great Depression. The fact that it did not is attributable to the federal government's forceful macroeconomic intervention in late 2008 and early 2009.

"Economists Alan Blinder and Mark Zandi (one a former Clinton appointee to the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, and the other a former economic advisor to Senator John McCain) have estimated that the nation's unemployment rate would have reached 16 percent rather than its actual 10.1 percent in the absence of this intervention."

The report, "Back to Work: A Public Jobs Proposal for Economic Recovery," written by Rutgers law and economics professor Philip Harvey, recommends an approach that "doesn't require us to wait for the economy to recover in order to put people back to work.

"It puts people back to work as a way of nourishing the recovery. It's a strategy for producing a job-led recovery rather than the jobless recovery we have been experiencing so far.

"The recovery strategy ... is conceptually simple: Create jobs for the unemployed directly and immediately in public employment programs that produce useful goods and services for the public's benefit.

"What this does for the unemployed is obvious. They get decent work while they wait for the recession to run its course. ... Benefits delivered ... trickle up to the private sector, inducing private sector job creation that supplements the immediate employment effect of the job creation program itself."

A million temporary jobs in a federally administered, direct jobs creation program – jobs in childcare, eldercare, education, public health and housing, construction and maintenance, recreation and the arts. And as many as 414,000 jobs created outside the program.

Annual cost in program spending: \$46.4 billion. Actual net cost, taking into account revenues and savings: only \$28.6 billion. How? For a fuller explanation, you can read the complete Demos report at:

<http://www.demos.org/pubs/BackToWork.pdf>. (Full disclosure: I'm a fellow at Demos.)

By the way, Harvey adds, "We currently need about 8.2 million more jobs to reduce the nation's unemployment rate to 4.5%. Creating that many jobs in a

program like the one described ... would require a net increase in federal spending of about \$235 billion during the first year. ...

“If the Bush-era tax cuts had been allowed to expire at the end of 2010, the federal government would have collected about \$295 billion in additional revenue during 2011. This would have been more than enough to cover the cost of the job program.”

Aspects of the report’s proposals are mirrored by legislation soon to be introduced by Illinois Democratic Rep. Jan Schakowsky – the Emergency Jobs to Restore the American Dream Act.

Over two years, her plan would cost \$227 billion and would be paid for by tax increases for those earning more than \$1 million and \$1 billion, closing corporate tax loopholes and ending subsidies for big oil. She says such programs as a School Improvement Corps, a Park Improvement Corps, a Community Corps, and the Neighborhood Heroes Corps, among other such New Deal-echoing creations, would create 2.2 million jobs and decrease unemployment by 1.3 percent.

Before you uncase your dueling pistols or put quill to parchment in an angry letter to the *Times*, for those of the right and center who seethe that Rep. Schakowsky’s plan veers too close to the days of FDR or even the sunny side of Bolshevism, there’s also a proposal floating about from the Alliance of American Manufacturing, a coalition of leading manufacturers and the United Steelworkers, that focuses on private sector job creation. One manufacturing job, they say, supports four or five others.

Among its provisions, according to AAM’s executive director Scott N. Paul: a national infrastructure bank leveraging capital for transportation and energy projects (a similar proposal is favored by President Obama); reshaping the tax code “in a revenue neutral way to provide incentives for job creation and investment,” including R&D tax credits and lower tax rates for manufacturing in America; “buy America” provisions for all federal spending; expediting small business loans; and shifting “some education investment to rebuilding our vocational and technical skills.”

I especially like this one: “Kick any CEO off of federal advisory boards or jobs councils who has: (1) not created net new American jobs over the past five years, or (2) is expanding the company’s foreign workforce at a faster rate than its domestic workforce. Replace them with CEOs who are committed to investing in America. Shame is a good motivator.”

The President will make a major speech on jobs shortly after Labor Day. According to the Associated Press, “It is likely to include tax cuts to help the

middle class, a build-up-America construction program that goes beyond any infrastructure proposal Obama has had already, and targeted help for the particularly worrisome group of people who have remained unemployed for many months in a row.”

All good, but unfortunately, if the past is any indication, what President Obama proposes will not be as bold or far-reaching as many of the ideas presented above.

It certainly won't include my personal favorite, as suggested by Steve Benen at *Washington Monthly's* "Political Animal" blog: "Have the White House take the several hundred letters GOP lawmakers have sent to the executive branch since 2009, asking for public investments, and let President Obama announce he'll gladly fund all of the Republicans' requests that have not yet been filled.

"This is especially important when it comes to infrastructure, a sector in which GOP members have pleaded for more investment in their areas. ...

"If these Republican lawmakers have identified worthwhile projects in need of government spending, which *they themselves insist* will boost the economy, why not start spending the money GOP officials want to see spent?"

Why not indeed? Alas, such an idea runs smack into more deficits: a deficit of irony among Republicans, certainly, but worse, a deficit of commitment and vision from a White House which until now at least, has been more focused on the pragmatic middle, despite a gainsaying opposition that yields nothing.

Still, as Benen writes, "When Republicans say 'no jobs, no way,' at least the nation will be able to see where both parties stand, and then choose accordingly next year." Amen.

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The Myopic Madness of the GOP

Pretty much the entire field of Republican presidential candidates embraces hostility toward the federal government, driven either by religious fervor or a belief in unregulated capitalism. The GOP hopefuls are appealing to a large subset of the U.S. population that resents the modern world and the lessons of

history, as Lawrence Davidson notes.

By Lawrence Davidson

A phenomenon that I call “natural localism” concentrates most people’s attention to the limited geographical area within which they live, work and study.

Inside their local zone, people can have first-hand knowledge, but they are also led (again quite naturally) to conform their views to those of their neighbors, their friends, their fellow workers, their religious congregations, etc.

In many of these categories, there will be personalities who stand out as leaders and they often have great influence in shaping the perceptions of local populations.

Beyond their local zone most people know little of what is real. Many folks are simply indifferent to the world beyond their own personal sphere.

And, most of those who might periodically become interested in what is happening on the other side of the hill, will tend to go with the opinions of their community leaders and, of course, the mass media.

The United States certainly suffers from the drawbacks of “natural localism” and sometimes the consequences are extreme.

You can see it in the periodic xenophobia that shapes the perceptions of local groups when it comes to migrant workers and immigration in general. You can see it in the periodic episodes of resurgent racism, as in the present case of Islamophobia.

But perhaps the most startling extreme expression of this phenomenon is the full-blown fear, suspicion and even hatred of the federal government by up to 20 percent of the American population. This extreme “natural localism” is expressed by a demand that the federal government go away and leave everyone alone.

There should be no taxes, no regulatory agencies, no social programs, no Internal Revenue Service and the like. In fact, within this scenario the only federal government activities that are sacrosanct are the military and the courts. All other responsibilities can be jettisoned.

If all these myopic extremists, born and bred to “natural localism,” lived in one state, they would no doubt want to secede from the Union. And personally I would be glad to see “the erring sisters go in peace” (to quote Horace Greeley). Unfortunately, they are too scattered about for this, particularly in the South, Midwest and Southwest.

These individuals also have found ways to assert the primacy of their quite limited worldview. A few have taken to murderous violence, though the numbers are surprisingly small given this group asserts the sanctity of gun ownership and is armed to the teeth.

More generally they have settled on the tactic of participating in the very politics they scorn so as to accomplish an end run into enemy territory. If and when their leaders gain high office their ultimate goal is to kill off large parts of the federal government – from the inside.

To this end the myopic extremists have infiltrated and transformed the Republican Party. If we take a look at the candidates competing for the Republican presidential nomination, all of them want to radically downsize the federal government.

Some take this stand because they believe God has told them to do so. For example, Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann, who recently won the Iowa straw poll, sees herself fighting on the side of the angels.

With a pseudo law degree from Oral Roberts University, she has been taught that “God grants certain authority to government, the Church and the family ... and if the government infringes on those rights by exceeding the authority it was granted by God, then that’s tyranny.”

Bachmann was also taught at Oral Roberts that one must seek to institute “biblical law over man’s law in jurisprudence and in politics.” That is what she is out to do.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a pseudo-prophet and a George W. Bush want-to-be, is of the same mind. Also probably fitting in this category is Rick “marriage is our ultimate homeland security” Santorum.

Then there are those who do not rely on religion but rather push a historically bankrupt philosophy of unregulated capitalism. Here we find folks like Newt “the invention of beach volleyball is what freedom is all about” Gingrich, Mitt “corporations are people too” Romney and others.

Actually, the only one of these presidential hopefuls who is, partially, in his right mind is Rep. Ron Paul of Texas. His strong desire to end the wars in the Middle East is absolutely sane, but move the discussion into domestic politics/economics and he becomes as nonsensical as the rest of the Republican field.

Behind this cadre is a hinterland of people whose perceptual capacities are dangerously narrow. These are the people who are mesmerized by right-wing talk

radio and the preaching of Christian right-wing ministers. They are mostly white, mostly middle-aged and publicly identify themselves as conservatives.

Again, we are probably talking about 15 to 20 percent of the U.S. population. Many of them are "Tea Party" members. But the "tea-sters" are just the angry tip of the iceberg. There is an additional quiet but supportive group who sympathize with these radicals. This runs to about 32 percent of the adult population.

One might think that one-fifth to one-third of those qualified to vote is a far cry from a governing majority, but that would be a mistake.

For the last 50 years, the voter turnout in federal elections has averaged about 47.5 percent with individual elections ranging from 36.4 to 63.1 percent. Given these low turnout numbers, smaller groups, which are well organized and motivated, can run away with an election.

What these myopic extremists do not know, or chose not to believe, can hurt us all. If they take over the federal government (and, if you have not noticed, they now control the House of Representatives), things like environmental regulations, health and safety regulations, banking and other fiscal regulations, Medicare and Medicaid, and even Social Security are all in mortal jeopardy.

The consequences will make the corruption of the 19th Century's Gilded Age look like child's play. And, assuming Ron Paul does not win in this fray, our new potential leaders have all indicated that they will once more take up the standard of George W. Bush and possibly lead us into war with Iran.

Where will they get the money for that? Not from taxation! Not from running a deficit! They hate such things. Well, they are ideologically against Social Security. It has a sizable reserve fund. Maybe they will rob that.

What Bachmann et. al. have done is to mistake their narrow range of vision for either God's universe or some form of holy ideology. Having done so, all who can see farther than they can become idolaters against whom a crusade must be waged.

There is no speaking sweet reason to people on a holy crusade. If you think you can negotiate with them and come to some sort of compromise, just take a look at President Barack Obama's experience dealing with the House of Representatives during the debt crisis.

But aren't there ways for people and communities to by-pass "natural localness" and see the world in a more cosmopolitan way? The answer, at least potentially, happens to be yes.

One of the longstanding aids with potential in this area is the public school system. It is quite possible to teach awareness of other cultures, other religions, other economic ideologies, other forms of government, etc. and instill in our children tolerance for that which is different. It takes teaching tolerance from K-to-12 consistently over generations to do this, but it is possible.

But guess what! The myopic extremists are suspicious of public education and much more enthusiastic about "home schooling." They think public schools are brainwashing their children and in a certain sense they are right.

One of the purposes of education within the nation state context is to produce good citizens. But for the myopic crowd that means loyalty to an unholy political system and the federal government. They have plans to change that.

You can add federal aid to education to that long list of things that will disappear once the extreme right truly has its way.

In the end, the best prevention against these people is to motivate the rest of the voting population to actually turn out at the polls and elect sane alternative candidates.

As the development of third parties seems a non-starter in America, it is up to the Democratic Party to supply those alternative candidates and to work up the necessary motivation.

Can the Democrats do this? I am afraid the hard truth is, it ain't a sure thing.

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