

Point of View:

Published: Feb 18, 2009 07:56 PM

Modified: Feb 18, 2009 08:21 PM

Plenty of poverty

BY GENE NICHOL

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CHAPEL HILL - These are, as they say, interesting times. A \$700 billion bank bailout -- with more to come. A Detroit rescue that now seems like chicken feed. A separate \$800 billion stimulus package. French-made, tax-subsidized corporate jets. Bonuses apparently designed to remind ordinary Americans what peasants we are. Newsweek's cover declares: "We're All Socialists Now."

Like many, I grudgingly support these steps. No doubt, we're in exigency. We face risks that, for too many of us, are unacceptable. So we act -- even if it entails venturing into the unknown. Better to partially misstep -- when our children's future is at risk -- than to sit back and watch the darkness descend.

But if we now attest that our collective jeopardy is unacceptable, we might do well to recall what we have, over the past two decades, apparently been more than willing to accept.

For a stunning number of Americans, and Tar Heels, peril is not a new companion. They have known its chill long before the crashes of 2008 and 2009. They have faced barriers, exclusions and denials of dignity that we should not have countenanced. Not if we are the sort of people we claim.

How can we have been satisfied, when in North Carolina, one of the strongest and most idealistic communities in the wealthiest nation on Earth, almost 15 percent of our fellows live in stark, unrelenting poverty?

That's a figure far worse than seen in other advanced democracies. It is a poverty skewed by race -- between 25 and 35 percent -- for blacks, Latinos and Native Americans. It's a poverty skewed by age -- with our youngest, and most vulnerable, the poorest. As if any theory of justice or virtue could explain the exclusion of innocent children from the American dream.

And how can we have been satisfied when, despite claims that we're all in this together, the top 1 percent, nationally, has more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined? And our income gulf between rich and poor is greater than at any time since we began keeping records four decades ago; and is now documented to be the highest in the industrial world?

And how have we been satisfied when over 46 million of us have no health care coverage? Leaving us alone among the 25 major industrial nations in failing to provide some form of universal coverage.

We rank first in wealth, first in military expenditures, first in gross domestic product, first in millionaires, first in billionaires, but only 12th in standard of living for the poorest fifth of our society, 14th in efforts to lift children out of poverty, 16th in number of low-birth-weight babies, 23rd in infant mortality, and, to our shame, 25th in children killed by gun violence.

And, in the venues where I work, how can we have been satisfied when a study two years ago concluded that universities are more economically polarized today than at any time in the past three decades? So that if you come from a family making over \$90,000 a year, your chances of getting a college degree by age 24 are better than one in two. If your family makes \$35,000 or less, the odds are one in 17. As if wisdom, intellect, ambition and worth were hereditary.

And, in the legal system, study after study, across North Carolina, across the South, across the nation, indicates that at least 80 percent of the legal need of the poor is unmet. Fencing out millions from the civil justice system. Making a mockery of the phrase "equal justice under law" -- etched on our courthouse walls -- in every state, and every county, and every city of this country.

And, finally, how can we have been satisfied, when decade after decade, in cultural arena after cultural arena, in election after election, these debilitating disparities are barely even discussed?

In law, in politics, in philosophy, in the academy, even in our pulpits, we have turned our gaze away from those locked at the bottom. We've come to think of a regime of economic apartheid as unassailable and untroubling.

Last week, President Barack Obama spoke movingly of Abraham Lincoln's belief that our nation's central purpose is to "lift artificial weights from the shoulders of all." As we struggle, in Washington and Raleigh, to press back against an economic crisis that threatens even the comfortable, it will be essential, for a change, to invest in the promise and the dignity of all. It is, as the president added, only "when we are in the deepest valley ... that Americans re-learn how to take the mountaintop.

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