Opinion
News
Guest Voices



(Dean Rohrer)

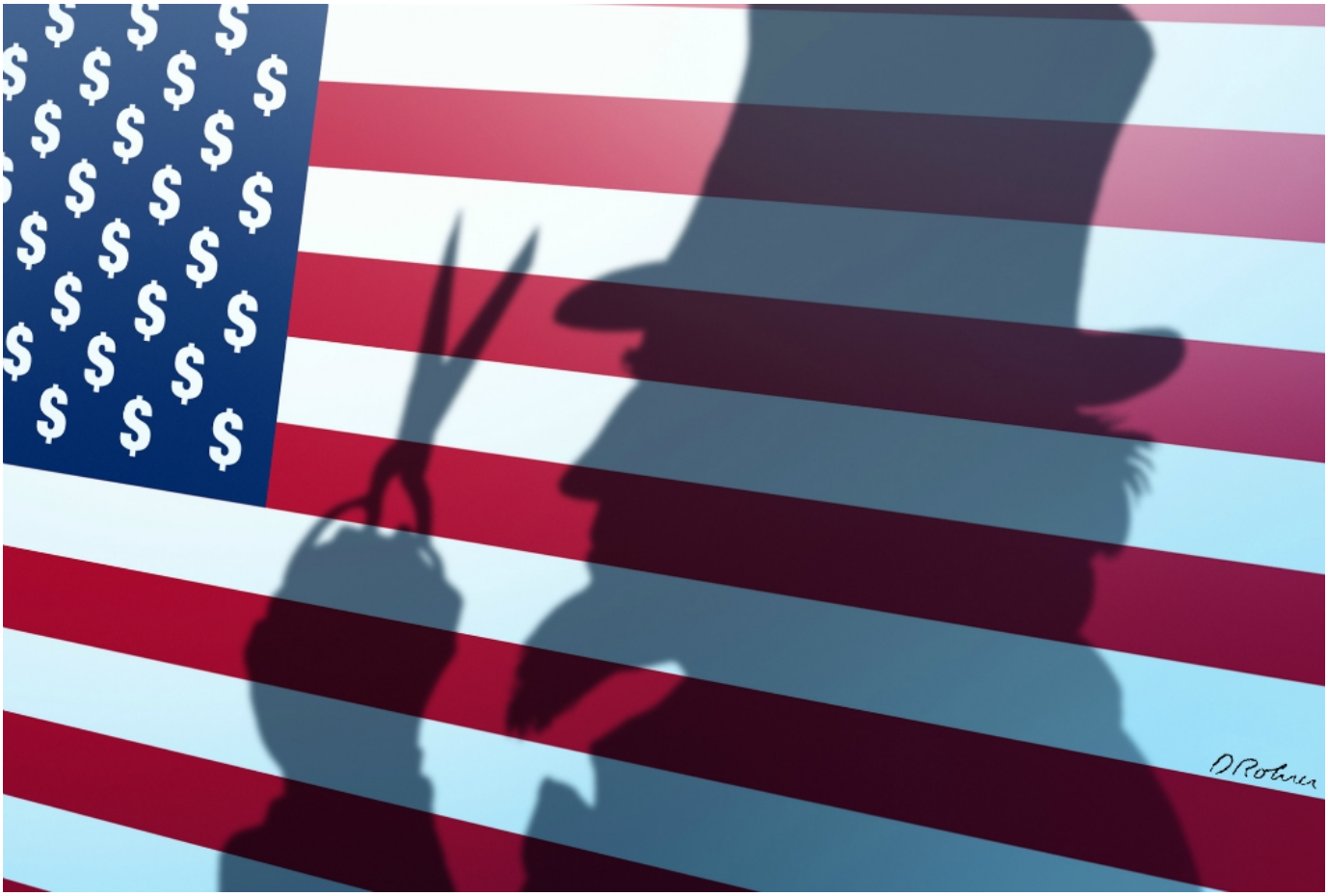
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As I write these words, a breaking news alert flashes on my phone telling me that the GOP's $1.25 trillion tax overhaul cleared its final hurdle in the House and is on its way to President Donald Trump for signing.

The tax bill, which passed both houses of Congress on party-line votes, is "a historic victory for the American people," Trump told his cabinet Dec. 20 a couple of hours before it passed. "It will be an incredible Christmas gift for hard-working Americans."

You know what? It isn't a victory and it isn't a gift. It is a ticking time bomb that will blow up our social safety net and leave hundreds of millions of Americans without a government they can look to for protection from unbridled corporate greed. This tax bill is ushering in a new Gilded Age, the huge shift of national resources away from the vast majority of Americans and toward the richest of the rich.

The president branded this the Trump tax plan, like his company brands ties and hotels. He doesn't really own hotels or make ties; they just bear his name. Just like those ties and hotels, this tax law isn't really his; he was just contracted to market it. The marketer-in-chief.

This bill really belongs to the right wing of the Republican Party and it has been fighting for this for a very long time.

Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wisconsin, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, have said as much. Ryan has been working for tax cuts his entire legislative career. McConnell told The New York Times, "Even before the rise of Donald Trump, we have been awaiting this day to be done for a long time. We just didn't have the pieces in place to achieve it. And all of the sudden after November's election, we did have the pieces in place."

"Today's Republicans would have fit right in to Hoover's administration," Boston College historian Heather Cox Richardson wrote. "There was always a rump group of Republicans who loathed the idea that they could not run their businesses without check."

Like the country under President Herbert Hoover (1929-33), we all should know where that leads.

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Much more is at stake here than just tax cuts. Tax cuts are one leg of this business-oriented remake of American governance. As deficits rise, budget cuts are inevitable. We will very soon be hearing about "welfare reform," and we know what that means: cuts to programs that make it possible for poor working families to afford food, housing, health care, and other basic needs. Deep cuts will come to Medicaid, Medicare and basic assistance programs.

The rhetoric will be vintage Hoover. Listen for arguments like this one, Richardson quoting Hoover's treasury secretary: "It will purge the rottenness out of the system. High cost of living and high living will come down. People will work harder, live a more moral life. Values will be adjusted, and enterprising people will pick up the wrecks from less confident people."

Middle-class Americans shouldn't fool themselves into thinking that they will be untouched by these "reforms." They may get to double their standard deductions and claim a couple hundred dollars more for dependents, but ultimately they will be losing government investments in education and training programs, transportation and other infrastructure, medical research, and child and elder care. These and similar social investments that benefit nearly all Americans are pegged for cuts in budget resolutions proposed in Congress in October.

But more change is on the way. At the same time media outlets carried news of the GOP tax plan victory, they also carried this headline: "E.P.A. Delays Bans on Uses of Hazardous Chemicals." Remember, the guys running things now don't want their businesses encumbered in any way. Environmental, labor and health regulations are going to be rewritten or ignored for the benefit of corporations. Get ready for more dangerous workplaces and environmental degradation.

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We are seeing an ideological shift in the dominant view of what government should do. Social justice Catholics — those who believe government's highest purpose is to support and advance the common good — should be hearing alarm bells. We should be clanging alarm bells.

We social justice Catholics will be accused of partisanship, but that isn't accurate. A look back at the NCR archives shows a pretty consistent editorial voice: We opposed Ronald Reagan's tax and budget cuts in the 1980s. We opposed Bill Clinton's dismantling of welfare and his loosening of banking and financial regulations in the 1990s. We opposed George W. Bush's budget priorities and his war-mongering. We praised his AIDS funding to Africa. We opposed Barack Obama's defense spending and his trade policies. I could list other examples.

Social justice Catholics stand with those whose voices are drowned out of the dominant conversation. Remember the "human microphones" used by the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2010-11? The crowd would repeat in unison the phrases and sentences of the person speaking. That should be our metaphor going forward. Only if we speak together can we be heard.

The message we need to broadcast is ripped from the Scripture readings of this liturgical season (Isaiah 61:1-2a, 11):

> [God] has sent [us] to bring glad tidings to the poor,
>
> to heal the brokenhearted,
>
> to proclaim liberty to the captives
>
> and release to the prisoners,
>
> to announce a year of favor from the LORD
>
> and a day of vindication by our God. ...
>
> As the earth brings forth its plants,
>
> and a garden makes its growth spring up,
>
> so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise
>
> spring up before all the nations.

[Dennis Coday is NCR editor. Follow him on Twitter @dcoday.]