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The Non-Persons in the Debt Ceiling Talks

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NCR Today

The debt-ceiling fiasco may haunt us for a long time both as an historical event and a unconscious strand of a horror movie.

For me, the most appalling aspect was that it showed how far politicians and the huge cadre of hangers-on in Washington are removed from those who suffer most in America.

The rhetoric was almost entirely about numbers, fictitious "job creation" and America's reputation in the world. The arguments were framed in the abstract: charts, graphs, concept versus concept, but bypassed the people who are already deprived or will be.

The closest it came to touching on actual persons was the defense of Social Security and Medicare, mostly by Democrats, impersonally. Republicans attacked "entitlements" as if they were concepts that bore no relationship to human beings.

I suspect that few if any members of Congress, or their staffs, or their advisors back home have any significant contact with people who are poor, sick, unemployed, homeless or losing their sanity trying to keep their families together.

As the absence of the struggling masses in the debate sharply illustrates, we are becoming a nation more segregated and isolated by race and class than perhaps at any time in our history. We simply don't know each other very well and the result is for the powerful to objectify the relatively powerless.

In times past, the well-heeled tended to live close to towns and run factories where they had to know workers as vital parts of their day-to-day operations. Class mingling to some degree off-set the class segregation. The banker met the laboring depositor on the street and maybe said hello.

The students I teach at an up-scale college for the most part grew up in privileged, suburban surroundings and had virtually no contact with those unlike themselves in any way. Chances are strong that they will graduate into jobs and professions with people from similar backgrounds, or who have adapted to their values from other backgrounds, and will spend their lives without knowing the richness of that poorer side of America that needs and deserves government programs. The privileged graduates will likely see no need for those programs; they believe the myths about having made it on their own so why shouldn't the unfortunate do the same?

I heard perhaps the major source of that class isolation in the tax-ceiling contretemps. "Those" people don't exist except as a drag on society, as stick figures who eat up "entitlements" and remain as problems to deal with not as human beings to benefit. Gone is the Great Society assumption that the poor themselves were the focus, which implied a reallocation of resources.

Catholic social theology teaches that political and economic policies be judged primarily by their impact on the poor. When was the last time you heard that argument on the floor of Congress?

Instead, self-interest prevails and the underclass of America floats from view like an untethered barge. From Washington, it seems nobody can make out any of their faces.

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