

SOMEHOW IT GETS TO BE TOMORROW

By Michael Ventura

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That headline is the title of a 1963 Stirling Silliphant *Route 66* script shot in Corpus Christi, Texas. There was a Ten Commandments plaque in front of City Hall and no one objected. A gas station advertised premium for 23 cents a gallon and regular for 20 cents. But the story remains contemporary: two homeless kids on the run. And it ended poignantly: It's night; the kids are still on the run; by morning they will certainly be hungry.

What people who haven't been poor don't get about poverty is that for the poor, crisis is continual and becomes usual – a tempo of crises that on the one hand make you tense as hell and on the other hand is almost dull in its constancy. You go from day to night to day and if it's not one thing it's another – like a supper for five of mayonnaise sandwiches on cheap bread the evening that the electricity is cut because an absent father didn't pay. That kind of thing. Over and over. If you're a kid, you watch your mother ache at your deprivation, and you try to protect her. If you're the parent, the caring parent, the shame and guilt damn near kill you – you feel it's your fault even when you're caught in an economic storm not remotely of your making. Kid or adult, the feeling of “somehow it gets to be tomorrow” is all that gets you to tomorrow.

Those mayonnaise sandwiches are a rotten memory. So my stomach clenches, literally, when I pick my town's paper, *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* (Feb. 3), and read on the front page how “84,000 people in the Lubbock area are receiving food assistance.” I don't live in one of the better parts of town. Whatever word is opposite of “gentrification,” that's my neighborhood. That front-page story is, inevitably, about some of my neighbors. (“Neighbor” is a word we'll get to later.) And my monthly contributions to the South Plains Food Bank don't make me feel any better.

Lubbock County, in the 2000 census, had a population of 242,628 (Wikipedia). There must be at least 25,000 more now. So 84,000 seeking food assistance is roughly one out of three. Thirty-five percent of households served have children under age 18, and “57 percent... report having to choose between paying for food and paying for utilities.” The *Avalanche-Journal's* killer statistic: “45 percent of the households include at least one employed adult.” For many Americans a job isn't enough anymore. Not enough to eat enough.

In the *Chronicle* on Feb. 5 (see “Point Austin,” News), Michael King reported that in the 21 counties of Central Texas “one in three food bank clients is a child.” My God, one in three. “[A]lmost half (43%) of the families needing emergency food aid have at least one working adult at home. ... One in five families experienced the physical pain of hunger... Texas was among 20 states with food hardship rates of 20% or higher” – 20 states! – “and 27.2% of Texas families reported difficulty affording food.” More than one in four.

Hunger wasn't mentioned in the president's State of the Union address nor in the Republicans' response. But hunger has become a national crisis.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles reports that “more than 1 million people... go hungry each day in Los Angeles” (*Los Angeles Daily News* online, Nov. 23,

2009). That report notes that in the San Fernando Valley “families seeking [food] assistance increased 60 percent in October over the last year, and 80 percent for the same month in 2007.” At the largest Valley food bank, “86 percent of the 30,000 hungry served each month are children.” More than 26,000 kids.

In New York City “an estimated 1.3 [million] New Yorkers now rely on soup kitchens (which provide hot meals) and food pantries (which give away food). The number of people having trouble paying for food has increased 60% to 3.3 [million], since 2003... More than half of New York City’s households with children have difficulty affording enough food. A staggering one in five of the city’s children, 397,000 small people, rely on soup kitchens” (*The Economist*, Jan. 14, p.35). And, in that article: “The Food Bank’s main office is just steps away from some of the firms who were given federal bail-outs.”

“[A]bout 280,000 Long Islanders needed [food assistance] last year... Thirty-nine percent were children under 18” (*The New York Times*, Feb. 10, p.24). That’s roughly 109,000 Long Island kids.

The hardship is national. One in eight Americans. One in eight – 37 million – “got food assistance over the course of a year, an increase of 46%” (*The New York Times*, Feb. 3, p.19). “Nearly one in five Americans said they lacked the money to buy food at some point last year” (*The New York Times*, Jan. 27, p.16).” One in five.

Unemployment is running at 9% or 10%. But, as Bob Herbert reported (*The New York Times*, Feb. 9, p.27), those figures don’t tell the real story. “The unemployment rate of the lowest [income] group, [with] annual household incomes of \$12,499 or less... was a staggering 30.8 percent. That’s more than five points higher than the overall jobless rate at the height of the Depression. The next lowest group, with incomes of \$12,500 to \$20,000, had an unemployment rate of 19.1 percent.” Middle-income families “had a jobless rate of 9 percent.” “[T]he largest and fastest-growing population of poor people in the U.S. is in the suburbs” (*The New York Times*, Jan. 23, p.21).”

Meanwhile, “1 in 5 lost health insurance in the past year (Reuters online, Dec. 16, 2009).” As for the jobs outlook: “one in four executives said they planned to cut jobs this year” (*The Week*, Feb. 12, p.37). And “one in 50 Americans now lives in a household with a reported income that consists of nothing but a food-stamp card” (*The New York Times*, Jan. 3, p.1).” States across the country are in budget crises, forced to cut services drastically. “Nearly 88,000 people had their homes repossessed in January... [and] more than four million homes [are in the foreclosure process]” (*The New York Times*, Feb. 15, p.20).” The Republicans respond with, among other things, a determined effort to gut Medicare (*The New York Times*, Feb.12, p.31).

And on and on and on – I could fill pages with this stuff -- while we are fight two expensive wars and fight them lavishly. In Afghanistan, “American commanders... have at their disposal a slush fund, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, known as Commanders Emergency Response Programme (CERP). This can be used for any number of schemes – from roads to clinics and schools – that help win local support” (*The Economist*, May 24, 2008, p.37).” Incredibly, at such a moment of national want, this president “is spending more on defence than his predecessors” (*The Economist*, Feb. 6, p.34).

In the Oval Office there is an inability, since last year’s Recovery Act, to accomplish much of anything domestically. In Congress, we see little but selfishness, cowardice, and fanaticism. Both parties share a grandiosity in foreign policy, which we can in no way

afford. Our leaders seem to believe they're governing some other country, some fiction of America. Political critique is beside the point in a political atmosphere that deserves – indeed, cries out for -- analysis by psychotherapists.

And here, in the Texas Panhandle, in a county of less than 300,000, 84,000 of my neighbors need the donations of their neighbors to feed themselves. On Long Island, 230,000. In Los Angeles and New York, millions. In Texas as a whole, more than 1 in 4 families. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of children. Ignored, not seen, in the State of the Union. Not seen by either party. Not one national figure speaks for them.

As for neighbors – if you're eating three squares, you have neighbors who are not. Their government has forgotten them. We can't afford to. If we do, we're not who we say we are.

It does get to be tomorrow. Somehow. If somebody gives a damn.

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