

WHERE WE ACTUALLY LIVE - Part 1

By Michael Ventura

October 8, 2010

Factions fling rhetoric at one another but don't talk much about facts. One result is that, as a citizenry, we've lost sight of where we actually live and our politics is no longer about what's going on in that strange place.

Here are fragments of an accurate description from *The New York Times*:

"More than a quarter of the nation's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. Leaky pipes lose an estimated seven billion gallons of clean drinking water every day. And aging sewer systems send billions of gallons of untreated wastewater...into the nation's waterways each year" (Jan. 28, 2009, p.A16). "[A] significant water line bursts on average every two minutes somewhere in the country" (March 15, p.A1). "75 percent of [America's] public schools have structural deficiencies and 25 percent have problems with their ventilation systems" (Feb. 20, p.A17). "Even upscale suburban districts are preparing for huge levels of layoffs" (May 20, p.A1). "Kansas City [Mo.] Will Shutter Nearly Half of Its Schools" (March 11, p.A20). "Costs Keep Rail Systems Outdated Across U.S." (June 25, 2009, p.A13). "Millions of Miles of Pipe, and Years of Questions – Weak Oversight Cited in Nation's System of Gas Lines" (Sept. 25, p.A1). California's "[i]nfrastructure spending... has dropped from 20 percent of the state budget to 3 percent" (Sept. 28, p.A29). "Most summer school programs... from elementary through high school" have been cancelled in Los Angeles (May 30, 2009, p.A9), as well as Florida, North Carolina, Delaware, Washington, Maryland, and Ohio (July 2, 2009, p.A1). "Arizona Drops Children's Health Program" (March 19, p.A17). "Money Shortage Forces Cut in Cases To Be Prosecuted" (May 9, p.A13). "Community Colleges Cutting Back on Open Access" (June 24, p.A15).

In Tracy, Calif., "residents will now have to pay every time they call 911 for a medical emergency. ...Residents can pay a \$48 voluntary fee for the year... [or] be charged \$300 if they make a call for help" (Feb. 21, p.WK8)

In one Brooklyn neighborhood, "within a 10-minute walk, three day care centers, one senior center, one swimming pool, one after-school program and a health clinic are to close. Venture 20 minutes more, and six additional facilities – two day-care centers, two after-school programs, a senior center and a health clinic – are also to shut down..." (June 5, p.A1).

"[B]udget shortfalls have led 11 states to close enrollment in programs that provide drugs to people with H.I.V. and AIDS... Arizona ended many behavioral health services for 4,000 children. Oregon has made significant cuts in community health programs for nearly 1,500 mentally ill residents and is eliminating a program that helps 2,000 residents with Alzheimer's or dementia receive care at home" (July 2, p.A24).

"Safety Is Issue As Budget Cuts Free Prisoners" (March 5, p.A1). Oregon, Illinois, Colorado, California and Michigan were cited. The director of Michigan's Department of Corrections, Patricia L. Caruso, said, "We can live in fear and make bad policy based on fear, or we can have some backbone and make policy based on what really helps our communities." Then she admitted, "I worry about it. I say a rosary every day."

“Firefighters have protested [cuts] in Florida,” as have nurses in Minnesota, which cut aid to health services, as has Alabama [*Time*, June 28, p.22). That article adds that Arizona cut kindergarten programs to half days (a hard situation for working parents) and that funds for schools “plunged” in New Jersey, while Florida “slashed” university spending.

“More than one-third of the trains, equipment and facilities of the nation’s seven largest rail transit agencies are near the end of their useful life or past that point” (*USA Today*, May 1, 2009, p.3).

The Wall Street Journal, Sept. 4, 2009, p.1: California, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Rhode Island and Colorado have “shuttered” most state offices one day per week; Detroit cut family services for foster kids; 7,000 state jobs were eliminated in Washington; 27,000 teachers were laid off in California; Maine families “cannot apply for food stamps or Medicaid”; Maryland has halved “the usual number of traffic patrols”; Georgia has 25,000 employees “facing furloughs”; lawyers there have trouble finding government personnel with whom to file papers at the State Court of Appeals. Five million Americans work for state governments; many of their jobs are no longer secure.

Public safety is directly threatened. “Budget cuts are forcing police around the country to stop responding to fraud, burglary and theft calls as officers focus limited resources on violent crime. ... ‘If you come home to find your house burglarized and you call, we’re not coming,’ said [an] Oakland police spokeswoman” (*USA Today*, Aug. 25, p.1)

“There are more people in poverty now – 43.6 million – than at any time since the government began keeping records (*The New York Times*, Sept. 25, p.A21). “Public employee layoffs and service cutbacks that states are enacting amount to an ‘anti-stimulus program’ that dwarfs the size of the federal government’s stimulus program” (*The Week*, July 16, p.4).

Pity the poor public official who tries to actually do something. “Daniel Varela Sr., ... mayor of Livingston, Calif., ... was booted from office last month in a landslide recall election. His crime? He had the temerity to push through the small city’s first water-rate increase in a decade to try to fix its aging water system, which he said spewed brownish, smelly water from rusty pipes” (*The New York Times*, Sept. 23, p.A1).

The unemployed, the part-timers who’d rather be full-time, and the many 18- to 24-year-olds living with parents, total roughly 20 million able-bodied Americans (*The Week*, Aug. 20, p.4).

I could fill five times this space with similar quotes. Piles of printouts surround me as I write. My files bulge with this stuff.

Republicans and the tea party cry for less taxes and smaller government without explaining how those policies address what’s actually going on where we actually live. The White House and most Democrats are unable or unwilling to recognize that what’s actually going on where we actually live is nothing less than a national emergency ultimately far more threatening to the viability of this country than acts of terrorism.

The United States is in critical need of repairs of every imaginable kind. There are 20 million able-bodied unemployed who could be trained to make those repairs. The solution is obvious. Pay the unemployed to be trained for the work needed. Employ these trained cadres to get the physical structure of America back to a fully functioning level and keep it at that level. Turn an unemployed, frightened, angry population into a

population doing work that is useful and desperately needed, making them wage-earners whose spending and taxpaying would revive this economy from the ground up.

No one in power speaks of such a solution.

Instead, we spend hundreds of billions on wars that profit us nothing.

So far, state spending cuts mainly hurt the poor, the ill, the helplessly aged, the young, and the many thousands furloughed and laid off. But states will cut again next year and the year after – there's no relief in sight. Sooner or later, every tier of this society will hurt. Even the rich need a functioning traffic system. Even they need water to run clean, bridges that stay up, dams that don't falter, and firefighters and police with the capacity to respond.

Infrastructure has no politics. It either works or it doesn't. A nation that lets its infrastructure crumble will wake one fine day to find itself crippled.

The fixing necessary is not about ideology; it's about nuts and bolts. If we fail we are all headed down the same chute into whatever we'll call a First World nation that crawls backward into a Third World swamp.

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WHERE WE ACTUALLY LIVE – PART 2

By Michael Ventura

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“One 12-nation study found Americans the least likely to discuss politics with people of different views, and this was particularly true of the well educated” (*The New York Times*, March 19, 2009, p.A31). That’s what makes possible headlines like this: “Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated” (*The New York Times* online, April 14). Conservatives and liberals are, in my experience, equally self-segregated and equally able to ignore facts that fail to support their opinions. Like-minded people who continually reinforce one another’s beliefs can end up believing anything.

The tea party’s battle cry of “take our country back” begs two questions: What country? Take it back from whom?

“Only 1 percent of Tea Party supporters are black and only 1 percent are Hispanic. It’s almost all white” (*The New York Times*, April 17, p.A12). In that case, “our” must mean “white” – the country I was born into, in which simply being a white American, especially a white American male, put you at the top of the world’s heap.

This is subtler than simple racism. I doubt most tea partiers are more overtly racist than most white liberals. Rather, what’s at play is an innate sense of worth conferred by one’s birth – a status and an identity that have been, not intentionally destroyed, but inevitably dissolved by circumstances impossible to reverse. The country they want back no longer exists.

“During the past decade, 83 percent of U.S. population growth came from nonwhites” (*The Week*, May 21, p.20). Forty-eight “percent of births in the United States [have been] to minority mothers in the 12 months that ended July 2008. ... The 50 percent benchmark could be reached as soon as this year” (*The New York Times*, March 14, p.WK4).

“[I]nter-marriage among Asian, black, Hispanic and white people now accounts for a record 1 in 6 marriages in the United States. ... Of all 3.8 million adults who married in 2008, 31 percent of Asians, 26 percent of Hispanic people, 16 percent of blacks and 9 percent of whites married a person whose race or ethnicity was different from their own” [*The New York Times*, June 4, p.A12]. “Hispanics have accounted for half of America’s total population growth since 2000. ... White children are already a minority in 31 of America’s 100 largest metropolitan areas. For America as a whole, whites will become a minority in preschools by 2021 and in the general population by 2042” (*The Economist*, Jan. 9, p.31). By mid-2008, “one in four American counties... passed or are approaching the tipping point where black, Hispanic and Asian children constitute a majority of the under-20 population. ... [C]ounties in the nation’s industrial heartland, inner suburbs and Great Plains are losing their largely white child and young adult populations” (*The New York Times* online, Aug. 7, 2008). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that “ethnic diversity in small-town America has increased sharply in recent years” (*The Week*, Dec. 19, 2008, p.6). “[T]he white population of big-city suburbs grew by 7% between 2000 and 2006. In the same period the suburban Asian population grew by 16%, the black population by 24% and the Hispanic population by an astonishing 60%” (*The Economist*, May 31, 2008, p.28). “In 2002, the birth rate for white women was 1.83 babies,” compared with 2.2 for blacks and 3.0 for Hispanics (*The Week*, Nov. 18, 2005, p.15).

This explains why “‘nativist extremist’ groups that confront and harass suspected immigrants have increased nearly 80 percent since President Obama took office, and antigovernment ‘patriot’ groups more than tripled over that period” (*The New York Times*, March 27, p.A19). But panicky, violent reactionaries cannot change birthrates. Given our increasing intermarriage, what is changing, underneath the raucous hoopla, is the importance and status of anyone’s color.

Here’s something else that present policies of Democrats, Republicans and tea-partiers won’t change:

“[T]he U.S. is the only industrialized country in which young people are less likely to graduate from high school than their parents” (*The New York Times*, May 26, 2009, p.19). “The U.S., which long enjoyed the world’s top high school graduation rate, has fallen to 13th behind such countries as South Korea, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia” (*The Week*, Nov. 14, 2008, p.20). In a study of “applied learning and problem-solving skills of 15-year-olds in 30 industrialized countries, the U.S. ranked 25th out of the 30 in math and 24th in science.” (*The New York Times*, April 22, 2009, p.A27). “30 million Americans have ‘below basic’ literacy skills” (*The Week*, April 9, p.5). “[S]tate dropout rates are highest in the South, where Georgia (22.1 percent), Florida (20.1 percent), Texas (18.5 percent) and North Carolina (17.6 percent) lead the way” (*The New York Times*, May 9, 2009, p.A18).

“The nation’s schoolchildren have made little or no progress in reading proficiency in recent years” (*The New York Times*, March 25, p.A18). “In federal writing tests, 32 percent of girls are considered ‘proficient’ or better. For boys, the figure is 16 percent” (*The New York Times*, March 28, p.WK12). Read those figures another way and a staggering 68% of our girls and 84% of our boys cannot write their own language.

There’s blame aplenty for all. Liberal educational innovations that have not worked are slow to be replaced. Teachers’ unions and bureaucracies refuse to adapt. Tax polices slash funds for working-class schools. Ideological curriculums of the right reject accurate science and history while ideological curriculums of the left also are guilty of academic cherry-picking, especially at the college level. Parents demand their kids receive high grades whether or not those grades are earned.

A typical result: “35 percent of voters 18 to 29 years old don’t even know that Democrats have a majority in the House,” nor did 29 percent of Democrats “overall” (*The New York Times*, Oct. 2, p.19).

We graduate and fail to graduate hundreds of thousands of unprepared young people every year. This can only make for a population incapable of informed decisions, incapable of improving itself, and incapable of keeping up with what’s going on in the rest of the world.

That is not a citizenry. That is a peasantry.

That is a steadily growing segment of the population fit for nothing but the most menial work, trapped by its ignorance and ripe for any demigods skilled in manipulating its passions.

As Frank DeMarco wrote this month (www.themetaarts.com): “A society of illiterates does not make possible, even for those who can read, the depth of services and knowledge offered by societies of widespread literacy.”

The result: In a 2009 study by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation that measured “what they call ‘the rate of change in innovation capacity’ over the last

decade – in effect, how much countries were doing to make themselves more innovative for the future... the U.S. ranked dead last out of... 40 nations” (*The New York Times*, March 3, p.A31).

That is what is actually happening in the place where we actually live.

Terrorists didn't do this to us. We sank this low on our own.

Democrats believe our education disaster can be addressed from the top down – an approach that's shown poor results. Republicans and tea-partiers offer nothing but low taxes and denuded government. Many teachers and some schools fight these trends valiantly and fight alone.

Ignorance cannot find its own way. Ignorance thrashes in a darkness it cannot comprehend. Unless our plague of ignorance is recognized as our number one national emergency – more damaging than terrorism or even insolvency – our future will be but the thrashings of ignorance, a nation helpless to know itself or its world, a giant and blind cripple smashing itself silly against the walls of the labyrinth that is the 21st century.

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