

## ***OF TIERS AND TEARS***

By Michael Ventura

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Oligarchy is an American fact. It cannot be accurately described with antique categories like upper, middle and lower class. Oligarchy divides society, with deadly effect, into rigid strata or tiers. (Does “deadly” seem too strong a word? It won’t when I’m done.) To recap briefly:

In the Top Tier are the oligarchs themselves, defined in a Paul Simon lyric as “a loose affiliation of millionaires and billionaires.” Beneath the Top Tier is the Professional Tier, which most directly serves oligarchs: politicians (up to the highest level), financiers, lawyers, doctors, top-scale entertainers, think-tank thinkers, academics and specialists as varied as physicists and fashion designers. Oligarchy pays the Professional Tier so well that its affluence isolates it socially from the lower tiers. These professionals believe they’re paid well for their merit, but, as we shall see, they’re paid to be isolated.

Below the Professional Tier are three descending tiers: the Skilled Service Tier, comprised of functions that cannot be outsourced, such as cops, nurses, middle management, and techs; the Unskilled Service Tier, such as clerks and waitresses; and Spare Parts, a tier in constant flux between desperation and the lowest levels of employment. (There is also what I call the Marginal Tier, a complicated bunch that, I’m afraid, needs its own column.)

Each tier lives in a different country, with different laws, customs, education, assumptions, and drastically different options. What the tiers have in common is that they’re isolated from each other. People tend to socialize and identify with those in their own tier. A tier not one’s own becomes “other,” and, like every “other,” easily stigmatized and dehumanized.

In the United States, the greatest single victory for capital-“O” Oligarchy was the deregulation of the financial industry under President Bill Clinton. Re-regulating that industry effectively would be an important step in subverting Oligarchy and restoring our republic. But that’s only one step. Far harder to remedy is the most pernicious element of Oligarchy, without which it cannot exist: the isolation of those in the Professional Tier. Their isolation is the single most destructive element in American society today.

Excellent services, private schools, fairly luxurious homes, international vacations – circa 1975 and earlier, only wealthy Americans lived that way. Now the Professional Tier takes such privileges for granted, as it takes for granted a potent degree of insulation from the nation’s nastier troubles. People of the Professional Tier, whether conservative or liberal, understandably act to keep their gains. But look at the long-term results of the Professional Tier’s isolation in just two spheres of American life: the military and education.

Every stratum of America fought World War II. Norman Mailer, a Harvard graduate, was drafted and plunked into a rifle platoon beside Texas farm boys. Sons of doctors, lawyers, and bankers served with sons of mechanics, cabdrivers and bakers. It was called “total war,” and it worked, defeating in less than four years far worse enemies than we now face.

By the 1960s, the Professional Tier was powerful enough to keep most of its kids from being drafted into the Vietnam War through college deferments and the like. Finally, as

that war went on and on, the injustice of Professional Tier deferments became intolerable. A just draft was instituted. You were assigned a number; if your number was called, you went, unless you had a physical disability or your service constituted an intolerable hardship for your family. After the Professional Tier's children became eligible for the draft, the war wound down. Professional Tier conservatives didn't want their kids in that war any more than Professional Tier liberals.

The Vietnam War proved that most in the Professional Tier wanted no part of the military. So the draft was ended and the military was restructured. It ceased being the citizens' army that the Founders envisioned and became instead a major job opportunity for the Unskilled and Spare Parts tiers. They are the core enlistees who fight for our privileges now.

The Professional Tier was and is delighted. Only in the direst emergency would they and their children be called upon. (Which is how you know that most of this "war on terror" is bunk. If the United States was seriously under military threat, do you think the government would hesitate to call up as many as might be needed?)

One result: An anti-war demonstration in which a possible draftee burns his draft card directly threatens military manpower. Government reacts. But, as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have proved, government need pay no attention to demonstrations led largely by Professional Tier people who have no military stake and whom the military no longer needs. If sons and daughters of doctors, lawyers and financiers were eligible to be drafted, everyone knows we would not have fought the wars of the last ten years. These wars are possible only because the Professional Tier, in effect, bought its way out of service. But, in so doing, the Professional Tier also bought its way out of power. Their elected representatives, liberal as well as conservative, may support any war they choose because the Professional Tier knows it's safe. War won't derail their kids' careers. Do you think Congress would support a war if Professional Tier financial supporters were screaming about it?

Thousands of Americans, and tens of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans, have died and are dying as a direct result of the Professional Tier's isolation and its hunger for safety. But you won't see anti-war Professional Tier liberals or pro-war Professional Tier conservatives work to reinstate a just draft, even though the price they pay for safety is political impotence.

That's how the tier structure of Oligarchy works.

Look at education. "Thirty million Americans have 'below basic' literacy and one quarter fail to graduate high school in four years" [*The Week*, April 9, p.5]. "At least one in five adult workers in New York City lacks a high school diploma [*The New York Times*, Feb. 22, p.A5]." Yet until circa 1970 our public education was among the best in the world. What happened?

As the public-school system became more and more troubled, overwhelmingly the Professional Tier sent its kids to private schools. A few did so out of sincere belief in other modes of learning. Most were simply buying their way out of the struggle to uphold America's standards of education. The lower tiers hadn't the political sophistication or the financial clout to make the fight. The result? Thirty million American illiterates and a 25% high school dropout rate. And the result of that? A massive number of Americans without the tools to cope with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, vulnerable to demagoguery, incapable of informed opinion.

Soon the Professional Tier will become the Professional Caste. Advanced education, necessary for the top professions, now costs too much for any but the Professional Tier to afford. American affluence is fast on its way to becoming an inherited privilege. That is Oligarchy.

The Top Tier plots and schemes for power, but the collective impact of individual choices makes or breaks a decent society. A collective move is essential for change. No matter their individual motivations, collectively the Professional Tier has protected itself out of power and influence while it plops its wealth into real estate and stocks, which in turn redistributes its moneys back up to the Top Tier.

The Professional Tier is magnificently oblivious to its actual function in Oligarchy. It opts out of the military and creates wars. It opts out of public education and creates an ever more dangerous mass ignorance. Unawareness of its function as a collective assures that the children of the Professional Tier will live in an ever more insecure and savage land.

To be continued.

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