

GRAND TOUR

Bully Pulpit

By Bruce W. Cook



SO I'M SITTING AT THE COUNTER for breakfast at my local Denny's. Yes, I go to Denny's – mostly alone – and I like it. That's not the story. Two men are sitting next to me at the counter talking about taxes. One guy says to his friend, "I worked two jobs last year and I made \$59,000. – the most I've ever made – and I have nothing to show for it." Ok, I was eavesdropping. I can't say I was doing so to protect America from terrorists. Just nosy. Not nosy on purpose. I simply listened.

Bottom line message is that the rich are getting richer and the rest of the nation can barely pay the winter heating bill. Mind you, I'm not a bleeding heart and I do believe in the free market, fluctuating, supply and demand economy. I don't want government programs overseeing every aspect of my life. But there's a problem. The scale is tipping too far in favor of those who do not need the scale to tip on their behalf.

In California home prices have risen to such high levels that only 11% of the state's citizens can afford to own their own home. This is not healthy. Further, what good is the enormous inflation if the homeowner is trapped in their expensive residence, unable to move and pay the increased property tax on a new home, let alone face the capital gains that may be due the government? I suppose when they start developing outer space, new opportunities may arise.

I am quite fortunate that my office is located in a posh facility on the water in Newport Beach. The rich and famous are an everyday sight to behold. And make no mistake – the high life in OC is fun. But I also see a large work force at the facility, many of whom also handle two or more jobs to make ends meet, just like my counter mate at Denny's. They have no savings to speak of, no cushion, no safety net. One gentleman, a young and capable junior executive, recently managed to purchase a home for his family – wife and two babies. It's two hours away from work. This is what they can afford, and he's driving four plus hours to and from his job to be able to own a home in a decent community where he can send his children to safe schools. At least he's among the lucky ones – he owns a home – one of the 11%.

What scares me is that with all of the money moving the economy forward, there appears to be a very large segment of society that is hanging on for dear life – going along for the ride. What happens when the train gets to the station?

The Federal Government is working on a fiscal budget to finance the war on terror. Education, health care, various domestic programs are slated for cuts. Such moves are further indications of impending trouble. Specifically, for example, cutting Federal college loan and grant programs to young people will harm not only the individuals, but the nation and the world. Education is the ultimate avenue to economic prosperity. Economic prosperity is the road to peace.

I do not have answers for the concerns I share over the imbalance of wealth in our society. I do know that any civilization or government that does not manage to provide for its entire people – rich, poor, and in the middle – will eventually face tremendous upheaval. It is imperative that the American people and our free market economy recognize that freedom in the arena of free enterprise – money and business, must work closely with government at all levels – to ensure that freedom survives. Yes, it's a contradiction of sorts – even somewhat oxymoronic. We don't want government interfering in our business, yet we need government to be involved in our business.

The pie needs to be shared by a lot of folks including my friends at Denny's. They – we – must have "something to show for our hard work." Without hope – without the fundamental American belief that hard work brings results – our society is in serious trouble. It won't be the terrorists who destroy us – we'll do it to ourselves. **GT**

Bruce Cook is the creator of Grand Tour Magazine. He is a twice-weekly columnist for the Los Angeles Times/Daily Pilot, and serves as Editor of the prestigious Bay Window Magazine. Cook has been heard on San Diego radio for the past five years, and is an Emmy-nominated television writer and producer responsible for such programs as Entertainment Tonight.