

United States - Response to poverty and empire: denial

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In the 1970s, Martin Agronsky, a weekend talk show host in Washington, finally invited the venerable I.F. (Izzy) Stone to join the establishment “pundits.” From the early 1950s through the early 1970s, Izzy had raised the basic issues to a readership — no more than 100,000 — of Stone’s *Weekly*.

Izzy treated inequality of income as both an axiom of capitalist economic relations and as a phenomenon sustained by the annual U.S. budget — that is, built into the “democratic” political system. He also questioned the veracity of the official U.S. version of the Cold War, with the USSR portrayed as the world fortress of evil seeking to spread its nefarious doctrine everywhere; thus the need for ever more money for “defense” of the free world. Such “dangerous” views, which he supported with fact and argument, won for Stone a position of avoidance by the establishment media — until he stopped publishing his weekly. Then, establishment journalists heaped accolades on his “heroic and imaginative journalism.” (See Myra McPherson, *All Governments Lie: The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I.F. Stone*, 2006)

As the TV panel discussed the budget that morning, the mainstream pundits went as usual straight for the periphery. After they had offered their banalities, Izzy said the budget reflected the class propensities of Congress. Thus, he continued, the large corporations and banks would as always be its major beneficiaries. Silence — for a seemingly endless second! In TV terms: disaster. Izzy’s first appearance as a Washington expert also became his last. Some things you cannot say in the major media or in political discourse — that is, if you hope to become a TV regular or a major candidate.

The interminable presidential campaign demonstrated the contemporary versions of institutionalized denial. For example, most members of the public and even Congress see desperately poor people every day, on their way to and from work, in streets, near their homes or from inside their cars. Yet, they accept an implicitly accepted dogma: do not, under any conditions, allow the use in political speech of the words “poor people.”

When Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich ran in the Democratic Primaries, he took dramatic exception to these house rules. The media and the political elite trivialized him and cast him into the margins of lunacy. After Kucinich reported a sighting of a UFO — not an alien space ship, but something that could have been a new air force missile — members of the chattering TV media mocked him, implying that he was a UFO kook. No wonder he said sympathetic words about poor people and even advocated for them. Ironically, these superior media critics believed Christ had risen from his grave and soared to Heaven on Easter.

Do most voters experience this gap between political rhetoric and reality as part of reality itself? Does the denial mechanism — don’t mention the poor — allow Republicans to label their Democratic rivals “too left,” referring to tax hikes for those earning over \$250,000, and use buzz words (socialist, redistributionist, and collectivist) as if God had made such “ists” sinful somewhere in the Ten Commandments? Indeed, Republican candidates routinely accuse Democrats of practicing “class war” — meaning the Donkey Party wants to take money from those who have enormous

excesses of filthy lucre and give it to the riff raff, welfare cheats, lazy bums. Translation: any and all poor people. Republicans indicate that those below a certain income level do not even merit description by the word “people,” except in the context of “those people.”

Mainstream Democrats tend to counter Republican “class” attacks with the awkward defense of claiming not to represent poor people; rather, they identify with “the middle class,” a verbal veil to cover their failure to recognize — in speech or deed — the miserable existence of millions of people, many of whom don’t vote.

In September 2007, U.S. Federal Poverty Numbers showed 12.5 percent of Americans — 37.3 million people — living in poverty according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Food Research and Action Center in 2004 claimed its studies showed almost 40 million U.S. kids experienced routine hunger during the course of their week. [\[1\]](#)

To what class do the 50 million Americans lacking access to health care belong? Are families earning less than \$40,000 a year “middle class?” In 2006, the bottom 20% earned less than \$19,178. Millions of adults and kids are homeless or a pay check or two away; thousands live in cars. But presidential aspirants agreed over almost two years of campaigning on the inherent virtues of that ephemeral “middle class.” In real life the number of poor people increased, but became less visible — not from our eyes, but for political speech parameters.

Did the major Party candidates fear that by mentioning the tens of millions of wretched of the earth they would lose votes, beget the ridicule of the media and, most importantly, alienate the major donors?

No major candidate called for a national health plan, even as the nation gets sicker. The media reported that diabetes rates had recently doubled due in large part to poor diets. Obesity became a recognized national problem among young people. Meanwhile, the cost of health care rises, thanks in large part to the ridiculous slice taken off the top of all bills by the insurance companies and the absurd price the pharmaceutical oligarchy charges.

Candidates behaved as if the “U.S. as Number One” belonged to eternity, although we have become number one in the number of foster children and have risen in our level of orphans — not to mention the number of meth-amphetamine labs and people of color behind bars. In the political debate, the issue of gay marriage actually trumped all discussions of poverty. Only prayer in school seemed to slide, temporarily, off the right wing political table — thank God.

As financial meltdown occurred, spurring a credit freeze, massive layoffs and a dramatic drop in consumption, candidates and Congress focused verbal discourse on bailing out banks, brokerages and insurance companies, the very creators of disaster conditions. Millions lost homes or are about to while candidates dared not question aggressive foreign policies. Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA) called for reducing the defense budget by 25%. Defense Secretary Gates warned: such a rash move would jeopardize “our security.” No pundits questioned his statement. Indeed, rumors fly that Obama will retain the supposedly moderate Gates as Defense Secretary.

Has the blitz of modern media erased memory? Don’t Republicans recall the venerable Republicans of the 1950s, not Ronald Reagan, but that pinko Dwight Eisenhower and his fellow Nebraska Republican Senator Howard Buffett (Warren’s dad)? Buffett and Ike believed that permanent commitment to fighting “for freedom” — or whatever — abroad would boomerang and hit this country.

After he won the 1952 election, Ike swore to end the Korean War. “Every gun that is made, every

warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed," he stated in the spring of 1953. "This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. [...] This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron."

McCain promised to stay in Iraq, while expanding troop levels in Afghanistan. Obama's campaign speeches emphasized saving \$10 billion monthly on the Iraq war, but increasing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan — while attacking Osama bin Laden and company in Pakistan.

Muscle-flexing sentences characterized campaign orations. Didn't analysts see the incongruity between more military spending at a time of rising debt and deficit, as the domestic infrastructure eroded? States and cities built huge deficits, school boards contracted pedagogic activities — but money went to banks instead and no major candidate questioned it.

The establishment monitors of U.S. political discourse forbid mention of empire and thus cannot admit to its decline. The fact is, "we" cannot afford to support an empire. "We" remain number one as "we" slide down the statistical pole in infant mortality, life expectancy and overall quality of life. As recession grows worse, "we" hear about how everyone supports "our troops." No major political heavy dares quote historian Gabriel Kolko's conclusion on the Iraq War. "It confirmed once more the lesson of the past century: any war, including those fought with high tech weapons, is a dirty, messy, and protracted affair that quickly goes askew." Instead, the U.S. policy elite defend the "Missile Shield" to "protect the West" against future Iranian missiles. Shades of the Cold War!

Such programs and the language that accompanies them vitiates against Obama's chances to promote another New Deal, to put people to work and fix the corroding infrastructure. Obama might well heed the advice of conservative populist Pat Buchanan — "liquidate the empire" — rather than allow the establishment figures to perpetuate the ideology of imperial denial.

P.S.

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* Saul Landau is a Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies and a senior fellow of the Transnational Institute. His latest book is *A Bush and Botox World*. His latest film is *We don't play golf here!* And other stories of globalisation.

Footnotes

[1] http://www.frac.org/Press_Release/1...