

Bus Tokens and Welfare Queens

by [Norman Ball](#)



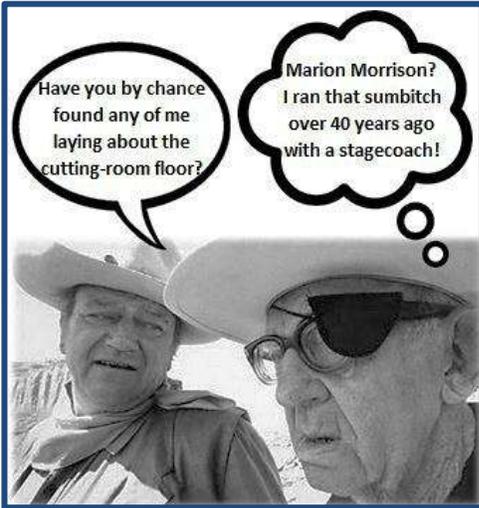
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"The president's campaign, if you will, focused on giving targeted groups a big gift." –Mitt Romney

If I will? Actually I'd rather not, Mitt. There's an old saying I've never heard before that goes something like this: Never beat a gift horse with a piñata stick. Can we talk? Mr. Romney was alluding to Hispanics (sorry, his maids and gardeners) when he inadvertently revealed, once and for all, his Non-Expanding Universe of One. Romney was never a company man. Hell, he collapsed them for a living. In short, he didn't get the promotion so now *everyone* can go fuck themselves. Whoa, even your friends, allies and tireless supporters, Mitt? In case you didn't notice, Romney was forever packing things up and shipping them *out* of America: our jobs, his money. It was like he was afraid stuff might get infected by something, I dunno, by *Americanness*. The fact was that, by happenstance of birth, he could be President only here. And if Romney was anything, he was ambitious. So he ran. And we told *him*, if you will, to fuck off. I'm gonna stop here before people think I voted for Obama.

A lot of these right-wing rugged *individualistas* are exhibiting acute symptoms of social malformation as politics becomes the new pathology. Who needs a dumb old polis anyway when you've got guns, ammo, silver bullion and Fox News? Socialization is for leaners and bleeding hearts. Communitarianism is a sign of weakness. John Wayne and his pigeon-toed swagger screwed up so many useful isolates that someone should file a class action suit against the John Ford estate.

And before some incensed Montanan deputizes his paranoid-schizophrenia to come hunting for me, Wayne was a friggin' actor, alright i.e. *he was only kidding!* Until near the end when he started to believe his own kidding. That's sort of



where we are today, boys and girls. On Monday, Mickey said 'let's put on a show'. By Wednesday, Judy was too stoned to remember the cameras were rolling. Cut!

So much for ten-gallon thespians and greasepaint; let's get to the real scumbags of this movie, the stubbornly destitute and chronically underemployed. Look, I don't presume to know where the sweet-spot for

American wealth and income distribution should lie. But I do know this: There is a *critical mass* of income the larger population must command if overproduction (under-consumption) is to be averted. When incomes are driven to subsistence levels (what Marx and Engels fondly called the 'central crisis of capitalism') through the normal machinations of competition, workers can no longer purchase the fruits of their own labors. Simply put, subsistence workers must forego cars and washing machines because it's all they can do to pay the water bill and dine on Hormel® meat products—despite the cruel irony they toil (if they're lucky) at building really bitchin' stuff by day. Capitalism becomes so insanely 'competitive' (i.e. Company One cuts its wages in order to gain market share over Company Two which in turn cuts its wages in order to regain competitive advantage over Company One, and so on and so forth...) that it strips workers of the ability to fulfill their symbiotic, offsetting role as buyers of product.

If only billionaires could grow legs with the facility they grow wealth. As it is acres of stonewash jeans languish, zipperless-fucked, inside dockyard crates. For unless Bill Gates steps up to fill the aggregate consumption void by purchasing one million pairs of pants per day for his personal use (as, say, 100 million American workers with sufficient disposable income might), we can kiss another ten apparel factories good-bye as well as the supply-demand equation

they once got a leg over on. As any factory owner has trouble explaining from his limited vista as landlord of but one disaggregated P&L, aggregate demand has to sort of equal aggregate supply or else subsistence begets subsistence, production stacks up for lack of buyers; hence the prefix *overproduction* (too much stuff chasing too little personal income). Workers get laid off. Demand collapses further still. Rinse. Wash. Repeat.

Now, I am no more a Marxist than was Karl Marx on his apocryphal deathbed. What I am though is a dejected observer of the overproduction phenomenon. Thus before you don your \$22.95 *Banana Republic*® Che Guevara t-shirt, you might want to check for telltale *Starbucks*® coffee stains. (This has been a registered public announcement by *Yours Truly*®.) Even beyond that, there are ways, within a capitalist framework, to avoid a self-destroying dynamic. Unfortunately only government can militate against the inevitable antisocial excesses of capitalism. Yes I know. I'm no great fan of government either. But if not Uncle Sam, then who? Donald Trump?

Bloodless abstraction that it is, overproduction makes for a lousy wanted poster. People prefer faces for their dart boards and the darker the better. For this, a welfare queen will do. Thus there is, in the wake of Romney's defeat especially, a tendency towards crocodile tears in Tea Party circles that folks in the lower economic tier are gaming the system when every empirical metric points to wealth and income in America hemorrhaging *upwards*, and with a vengeance. Targeted morality is no morality at all. What we need desperately in America are more hard-nosed empiricists and fewer hysterical, yelping ideologues with sublimated racial beefs. How else to explain why these champions of 'economic equanimity' consistently fail to hassle the gilded tail of the dataset, you know, the folks with almost all the poker chips at this advanced stage of the game?

Let's examine three broadly accepted statistics:

- From 1965-2008, \$16 trillion was spent in LBJ's War on Poverty. (Source: A Nation Like No Other, by Newt Gingrich, p.109)

- Today, the richest 1% of Americans own 40% of the nation's wealth. Twenty-five years ago the top 1% owned 33%. (Source: Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz)
- In 2007, the lower 50% owned 2.5% of the nation's wealth. (Source: Institute for Policy Studies)

No sooner does one set up this three-card-Monte table than beleaguered cloth-coat Republicans make a beeline for bullet number one: in what offshore account, they want to know, has that massive slug of po-folk entitlement money been stashed? It's highly doubtful the bottom 5% owns a disproportionate amount of the 2.5% wealth spread across the bottom half unless they're squirreling away welfare surpluses (*puh-lease*). More than likely the very poor are plowing their ill-gotten gains into staples, a classical Keynesian phenomenon known as 'barely scraping by'. However another way to interpret the first statistic is that the poor are unshakable champions of GDP activity (true patriots one might say with scant knowledge of the Cayman Islands) because all the wealth (really, income or transfer payments) they control flows directly into down-home consumption *or else*, again, they have taken a page from the Mittster, secreting their 'entitlement wealth' away in Swiss bank accounts, a nefarious scheme these damned statistics simply fail to capture. I subscribe to a far more plausible explanation: The poor languish in poverty because they aren't rich.

If we accept the poor aren't pleading poverty as a cheap stunt, how do we reconcile the current wealth and income trends against the widely-cherished Republican trope America's wealth and treasure is leaking like a sieve into the pockets of the unrepentantly downtrodden (unless we're including the 'non-productive rich', trust-fund babies et al, something Republicans are almost religiously averse to doing)? Clearly the real danger we face is not a descent into Soviet-style democratic centralism but a lurch into Brazilian plutocracy and evisceration of the American middle class, not at the hands of the *poor*, but more

beneath the feet of the *rich*. And yet I hear one cubicle-jockey after another bemoaning the socialist nightmare Obama is bringing down on our heads. Okay, I might accept that the middle class is getting gnawed at from both ends. But clearly the rich have taken way bigger bites. Look at the bleedin' numbers!

I realize that for some—albeit on an irrational, emotional level—it's maddening to think a bunch of indigents can collect something, anything, for nothing. Frankly, what could be more galling than getting passed every day on your way to work by an SSI recipient in a gas-guzzling Hummer? Talk about justifiable road rage! As is the case with most emotional arguments though, there are some troubling blind-spots. For example, why don't all forms of entitlements receive an equal dose of opprobrium? I'm thinking of corporate welfare recipients. According to a 2006 study, the government spent about \$59 billion for traditional social welfare programs and nearly twice that, \$92 billion, in assistance to corporations annually. That's a lot of boardroom panhandling. Is the underclass simply an easier target for the schoolyard bully? Or is the rule in America that if you're going to steal, steal big? Otherwise morally confused Americans won't respect you. Or something like that.

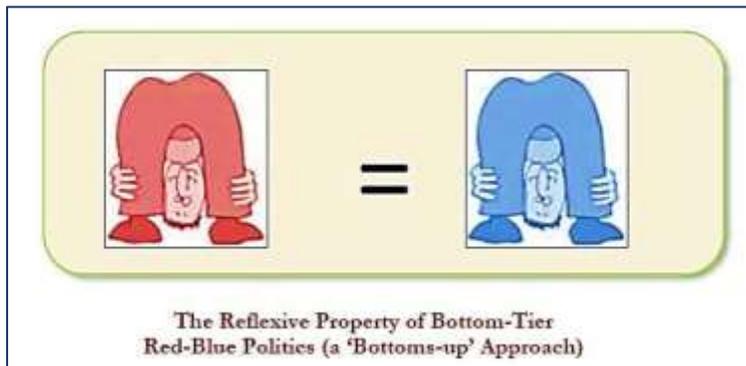
The selective outrage is reminiscent of the poor white Southern redneck of the early '50's. For those with a sense of not-so-distant history, the Southern white aristocracy drew a line in the middle of the transit bus, made-believe it was sand, then, in near-vigilante fashion put the redneck in charge of forbidding the African-American a seat on the wrong side of the line. Why? Well, as the rich white dude succeeded in assuring the poor white dude (before resuming the backseat of his *Driving Miss Daisy* limo) the latter *deserved* the front of the bus, 'cause you know 'we white folk gotta stick together.' This of course was music to the poor guy's ears as he was beginning to feel his wife-beater T-shirt was precluding him from the 19th (watering) hole at Augusta. Well it certainly wasn't the color of his skin!

His elevated status in society thus reaffirmed, Bubba trained his eye on that line like it was his mamma's backbone and the Mason-Dixon all rolled into one. So intent was he on his Jim Crow perk that he failed to notice the rich white guy

being driven away in a '48 Hudson snickering at....*everyone on the bus*. The rich white guy knew what the poor white guy couldn't bring himself to acknowledge: the American redneck is a sucker for token crumbs and invisible lines, the only real color is green and *every other color is just a seat on the bus*.

Though the bus-routes change, the tactic remains as timeworn as it is diversionary. Therefore I cannot counsel my fellow, besieged, largely white, 21st century middle-class compatriots enough that, should they find themselves obsessing over uppity welfare queens (as some undoubtedly are), they have fallen prey, once again, to a venerable billionaire ruse. Of course no sooner do I type this than I know it will go largely unheeded. Everybody wants the scalp of a welfare queen if for no other reason than to prove such an entity exists beyond the fevered imagination of Ronald Reagan, which it never did. The last time the welfare queen was trundled out we got trickle-down economics. Nuff said.

While we're on the subject of false divides and the putzes who perennially embrace them, can everyone who doesn't own a vacation home in the South of France please get over this Democrat-Republican teacup storm? Nobody actively courts poor people so much as the latter tend to lumber dejectedly into lesser-of-



two-evil formulations. Alas today, the lesser evil is too evil by-half. For the poor, political decisions are not unlike that stupid reflexive property they taught us in high school algebra: "I'm

going to get screwed or I'm going to get screwed, so I guess I'll get screwed." No wonder algebra has limited real-world applicability, especially in areas of urban blight. As for the poor, let them eat grim political calculus. They're always bumming cigarettes. Who needs 'em?

In real life, the Democrats chase trial attorneys, the Republicans chase HMO executives and so it goes. It's not called retail politics for nothing. The point is

both parties must chase *money* and everything ends up becoming what it chases—you know, the pigs are men and the men are pigs? It costs close to \$1 billion to mount a presidential campaign. Poor people are useless for such a costly enterprise. Of course the Dems *claim* to be in it for poor people. Really the blue-red demarcation offers, at best, a stylistic choice as to *how* the U.S. is going to be driven into the ground and by which guild or clique, nothing more. Remember, the fancy organ on the Titanic sank to the bottom of the Atlantic with all keys aboard. You want to arm-wrestle over *how* we're going to sink? The fact is we're sinking. Stack the color-wheel with the deck chairs and the Hammond®, Captain, 'cause we're goin' down.

Normally this is where an essay of this sort does an obligatory left-leaning liberal (LLL) veer. This is not a class warfare screed. There is no particularly compelling reason to favor the American poor over the American rich (beyond humanitarian concerns for the former in the event of hunger or extreme deprivation). A more rigorous empirical analysis should please all parties if only to properly characterize the post-mortem analysis. Fiscal responsibility (read: old-school sane Republicanism) is a political nonstarter because you don't raise \$1 billion running a tight ship. The entitlement craze is an epidemic, infecting *all* strata of American society (have the petit-Republicans forgotten too-big-to-fail, TARP, etc.?)

You might say the nation's moral bankruptcy is endemic and class-blind. You might also say the rich exhibit their lost moral compass more ostentatiously only because they have the financial wherewithal to do so; or that the poor are morally at sea on a smaller scale as befits their need to look ugly on a shoestring budget. Qualitatively, I see nothing that recommends one class over the other in any moral sense. There is no such thing as the virtuous poor any more than there is a sublime social glue called *noblesse oblige*. Everybody generally sucks to the best of his and her economic ability. An unheeded clarion call arrived in 1987 when 3,500 years of Judeo-Christian praxis was essentially turned on its head by one lousy sound-bite: "greed is good" (Gordon Gekko). We've been sinking under the

moniker of ascent ever since. Greed is today's oxygen. Too bad its symptomology conforms more to carbon monoxide poisoning.

Even if wealth was redistributed from the top to the bottom, the latter lacks the productive attributes anymore to do anything but plow its one-time windfall into consumption which would generate a momentary GDP bump, but no sustainable productive effect. The bottom part of America society is simply too far gone (in terms of inadequate education, marketable skills, etc.) to make productive use of the windfall. I hasten to add Paris Hilton is not exactly arrayed with a plenitude of marketable skills either. When the musical chairs of capital formation stopped, Ms. Hilton happened to be ensconced in a golden hammock. Our captains of industry have long since ceded the boardrooms to sad sperm and reality TV bimbos. Oh for the salad days of old-school sociopathic robber-barons. At least they built *real shit* like skyscrapers and railroads.

So how many social workers are there in China? What is a social 'worker' anyway? It's a former addict holding up a 'portfolio' of 20 current addicts. If my calculations are correct, that comes to one public-sector paycheck for every 21 non-productive Americans. The problems in America are no longer *simply* economic, fiscal (tweaks in tax policy) or even class-oriented. What a luxury it would be if they were. The problems are moral, structural, generational, cultural and impervious to short-term fixes.

America's future is not in plastics. It's in bananas—Brazilian ones to be precise—and not the new, BRIC Brazil either but the old one with Rio shanties, lean-to's and street urchins digging through dumpsters. Absent substantive campaign finance reform for too long (a government captured, catastrophically for all, by the top), there is no redistributive remedy the rich will allow to ameliorate the imbalances, even if such remedies engendered longstanding benefits which it's far from clear they would.

If you take off your red, white and blue glasses (something the wealthy did long ago), there must be 200 cities around the world that offer better investment

opportunities than Detroit. Globalization allows American wealth to travel the world with impunity in search of the optimal investment environment (long-long-term, this will probably equilibrate into a more equitable planet). Thus best-case, the U.S. faces an incredibly arduous multi-generational process of re-educating itself 'back to the front' of Kuala Lumpur as a comparatively more attractive locale for global capital.

A vaporized middle class serves no one. The wealthy will regret the middle's demise no less than will the poor. Unfortunately greed is called *blind* for a reason. In their reptilian, blind pursuit of *more*, the wealthy have dealt a death-blow to the golden goose in the middle roost. This mindless plundering reflects an overall profligacy in the American upper class borne in part of inherited wealth (no more earned than food stamps) and a corresponding lassitude towards robust and engaged societal participation. No less a private property advocate than John Locke was leery of inheritance. (And may I rehabilitate my fellow Scot Adam Smith a bit here by reminding all parties he was the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow and not simply a Chicago School economics wonk?)

Quite simply, we are awash in too *few* Andrew Carnegie's and too *many* Paris Hilton's. The latter and her ilk will simply retreat to gated communities in neo-feudal funks polishing their nails distractedly and leaving the rest of us to roam the countryside like Chaucer's highwaymen and beggars. Nor can we expect Oval Office intercessors to reverse what is an inexorable, cultural decline. An Old Testament gnashing of teeth interregnum lies dead-ahead. There is a non-rescindable moral *law of momentum* that necessitates such a period. Hammering the poor, the weakest in our midst, over their stubborn penchant for 'remaining poor' while ignoring corporate trough-feeders, is one more facet of the greed ethos converging on a moral nadir. Diebold® voting booths are icing on a fallen cake. Obama can't help us. Neither, if you will, could Romney.