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*Think Piece  
The Spiritual Death of a Nation  
by Paul Street*

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*"A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." – Martin Luther King, Jr., April 4, 1967*

Thank you all for taking time to hear what I have to say about the conflict between militarism and social and spiritual health of the nation.

Since I'm in a Republican district, let me start by noting that the conflict between military expenditure and social spending and health in United States history is a richly bipartisan affair. It became especially prominent during the 1940s, when Democratic administrations (Roosevelt and Truman) oversaw the rise of a "permanent war economy" and what the Republican President Dwight Eisenhower famously labeled the "military industrial complex."

***“The Triple Evils That Are Interrelated”***

Some of you may recall the great civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking and writing in the middle and late 1960s about what he called "the triple evils that are interrelated": militarism, poverty, and racism. "I [can] never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos," King said, "without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government."

King was moved "to break [his] silence" on Vietnam by "allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism." His Christian-humanist values meant that he could not watch passively, he said, as "as we poison" the Vietnamese peoples' "water, as we kill a million acres of their crops," and "send them into the hospitals, with at least twenty casualties from American firepower for one 'Vietcong'–inflicted injury." The people of Indochina, King mused, must find Americans to be "strange liberators" as "we

destroy...their...famil[ies], village[s],...land and...crops."

Focusing back on the American home–front, King spoke and wrote about the fact that many young black Americans and poor whites were in Vietnam because their poverty was so high and their job prospects so low that enlistment looked like a step up. He observed that the American government's resort to mass bloodshed in Southeast Asia was undermining his ability to argue effectively for nonviolent social activism at home. And he noted that American government's decision to pour tens of millions of dollars into the destruction of Southeast Asia was undercutting its ability to deliver on the "promissory note" of social justice it had started to write with its briefly declared "War on Poverty." "With the resources accruing from the termination of the war, arms race, and excessive space races," King told the US Senate in 1966, "the elimination of all poverty could become an immediate national reality. At present," he bitterly observed, "the war on poverty is not even a battle, it is scarcely a skirmish." "Defense" expenditures in Vietnam, King knew, were strangling the anti–poverty "war" in its cradle.

### ***“Spiritual Death’ and ‘National Priorities”***

Struggling against the toxic, interrelated logics of empire, inequality, and racism, King called for "a radical reordering of the nation's priorities." By 1967, he went public with his determination that that "reordering" required "restructuring the whole of American society." "There are forty million poor people here. And one day," King said, "we must ask the question, 'Why?'" When "you ask that question," he added, "you begin to question the capitalistic economy."

"Something is wrong with capitalism," King felt, when it was more profitable to invest in the napalming of South Vietnamese villages and children and in the building of new weapons of nuclear annihilation than in America's own forgotten inner cities. There was something richly perverse, King knew, about a society in which giant, soulless corporations – creations and masters of capitalism at one and the same time – influenced policy to privilege militarism, empire, and death over community, justice, and health.

In his last and most radical presidential address before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), King made some deep historical connections between each of his "triple evils." "A nation that will keep people in slavery for 250 years," he observed, "will 'thingify' them – make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together." For King, empire, inequality, capitalism ("materialism"), and racism were inseparably bound up with each other as part of the same deadly complex of soulless social injustice.

His statement to the SCLC echoed his comments at Riverside Church. There King had called for the US "to get on the right side of the world revolution" by "begin[ing] the shift from a 'thing–oriented' to a 'person–oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people," King warned, "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

"A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift," King added, "is approaching spiritual death." King was driven to these conclusions and to endorse "democratic socialism," it is worth noting, at a time when the Democrats controlled all three branches of the federal government, at the height of the "liberal [New Deal] consensus."

### ***Social and Health Inequality in “The Beacon to the World of the Way Life Should Be”***

So how do the nation's priorities stand nearly four decades later? More than 36 million residents of the United States, which US Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R–Texas) called (in early 2003) "the beacon to the

world of the way life should be," languish beneath the federal government's notoriously low poverty level (\$14,680 for a family of three in 2003). More than 11 million or 17 percent of US children live below that sorry measure, and the US child poverty rate is substantially higher than that of other industrialized nations. More than one in three US children live in or near poverty and more than 8 million Americans live in homes that frequently skip meals or eat too little. Suicide takes the lives of 30,000 Americans each year. It is a high-ranking cause of death for 10–14 year olds, 15–19 year olds, and 20–24 year olds in "the beacon to the world."

In this big study I did with the Chicago Urban League last spring, I found 15 Chicago neighborhoods in 1999 where more than a quarter of the children were living at less than half of the federal government's notoriously inadequate poverty level. That was at the peak of the Clinton boom!

Here in Grand Rapids, 1 in 5 kids lived in poverty in 1999 and 14,000 lived at less than half of the poverty level – what researchers are now calling "deep poverty." Down in the predominantly black (92 percent) town of Benton Harbor, which I passed on the way up here from Chicago, more than half of the children and 40 percent of its families lived in poverty. Median household income in Benton Harbor was \$17,471, less than two-thirds of the minimum basic family budget (the real cost of being poor, as meticulously calculated by The Economic Policy Institute) for one single parent and two children living there: \$28,422. According to one local minister who was interviewed when that town erupted in a major riot in June of 2003, less than one in every three adult males in Benton Harbor was employed when the violence broke out.

More than 42 million Americans lack health coverage. The "beacon" is still the only modern industrialized state without a universal, socially inclusive health insurance plan. Reflecting one part of a broadly shocking disconnect between regressive policy and fairly progressive public opinion in "America, the best democracy money can buy," nearly two-thirds of the homeland's populace actually supports "a universal system that would provide [health] coverage to everyone under a government program" (Will Lester, "Poll: Public supports Health Care for All," Washington Post, 19 October 2003).

Even though it's the world's second richest country (after Norway) in terms of per-capita wealth, the US ranks below 24 other nations in life expectancy. Part of the explanation for this seeming anomaly lay in the astonishing over-concentration of wealth in the US, where the top 1 percent owns more than 40 percent of the wealth. The top 10 percent owns two-thirds of US wealth, leaving the rest of us – 90 percent of the population – to fight it out for one third of the nation's assets.

Things get worse when you factor in race. By 1999, economist Thomas Shapiro has noted, the "net worth (all assets minus all liabilities) of typical white families was \$81,000 compared to \$8,000 for black families" in the US. By the recessionary year of 2002, black net worth fell to seven cents on the white dollar. Of those fifteen Chicago neighborhoods I just mentioned, all but one is very disproportionately black for the city.

### ***Savage Health Inequalities***

As the New York Times acknowledged in a front-page story titled "Life at the Top Isn't Just Better, It's Longer," "class is a potent force in health and longevity in the United States. The more education and income people have, the less likely they are to have and die of heart disease, strokes, diabetes and many types of cancer. Upper-middle-class Americans live longer and in better health than middle-class Americans, who live longer and better than those at the bottom. And the gaps are widening, say people who have researched social factors in health. As advances in medicine and disease prevention have increased life expectancy in the United States," *Times* reporter Janny Scott elaborated, "the benefits have disproportionately gone to people with education, money, good jobs and connections. They are almost invariably in the best position to learn new information early, modify their behavior, take advantage of the latest treatments and have the cost covered by insurance" (Janny Scott, "Life At The Top," NYT, 16 May 2005).

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If you break America's mortality statistics down by race and class, you find that blacks and poor people live considerably shorter lives on average than affluent and white people in the US. Unequal health care contributes to more than 100,000 black Americans dying earlier than whites each year. Middle-aged black men die at nearly twice the rate as white men of a similar age. According to former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, in an important paper published in the March–April issue of *Health Affairs* – just before the national media's Terry Schiavo melodrama focused America on medical ethics and the "right to life" – elimination of this racial gap would prevent an estimated 83,750 early deaths each year. In another paper published in the same *Health Affairs* issue, David R. Williams of the University of Michigan and Pamela Bradbury Jackson of Indiana University showed that black infant mortality is two and a half times higher than white infant mortality.

In Chicago, predominantly white Northwest Side Chicagoans can expect to live 75 to 80 years. Predominately black South Siders have a life expectancy of around 60 years. Black men die at a rate twice the rate of white men in Chicago. The death rate for black women is nearly twice that of white women. Thirteen of the city's top 15 neighborhoods for HIV mortality are disproportionately black for the city. Ten of them are 94 percent or more black. Of the top 15 for heart disease mortality, 12 are disproportionately black and 10 are at least 94 percent black. Similar strong correlations between sickness, race, and place (neighborhood residence) can be found in numerous other health categories.

According to Satcher, Williams, and Jackson, lower black income, poorer access to health care, differential neighborhood quality, and harsh residential race segregation combine to create these appalling racial health disparities. The imperial homeland's failure to guarantee health care to all its citizens combines with persistent savage racial inequality and apartheid to impose an early de facto death sentence on hundreds of thousands black Americans.

If you are looking for an instructive exercise in how dominant media differentiates "worthy" from "unworthy victims," do a Lexis–Nexis, yahoo, or google search to determine which issue receives more media attention in the US: this heavy toll of premature black mortality or the death of one white woman named Terry Schiavo. The "Christian" "right to life" crowd hasn't gotten around yet to making a national "moral issue" out of the first problem.

I could go on. The list of unmet Americans needs is practically endless. The record of public disregard for the "unworthy victims" of "homeland" inequality in the US is voluminous.

### ***“Like a Third World Nation”***

To a longtime poverty and race researcher like myself, it was rather odd to see the nation jolted by Katrina into a surprised discussion of, well, poverty and race. At the most immediate level, the *New York Times* acknowledged on the front page of its September 9th edition that "race and class were the unspoken markers of who got out and who got stuck" in New Orleans."

Two days later, on the fourth anniversary of 9/11, *Times* reporter Jason DeParle noted that "what a shocked world saw exposed in New Orleans last week wasn't just a broken levee. It was a cleavage of race and class, at once familiar and startlingly new, laid bare in a setting where they suddenly amounted to matters of life and death. Hydrology joined sociology through the story line, from the settling of the flood-prone city, where well-to-do white people lived on the high ground, to its frantic abandonment." Since the 1970s, DeParle noted, New Orleans "has become unusually segregated," so that "the white middle-class is all but gone, moved north across Lake Ponchartrain or west to Jefferson Parish – home of David Duke" (and of higher ground).

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In a society where the atomistic auto trumps public transit, "evacuation was especially difficult for the more than one third of black New Orleans households that lacked a car." While race and class have always been "matters of life and death" in the American experience, of course, Katrina's tragic aftermath has provided perhaps the most graphical and literal illustration of the way that American societal arrangements apportion "freedom" in racially and socio-economically selective and unequal ways. We all know who got "left behind" (to take two words [themselves looted from the Children's Defense Fund] from Bush's regressive educational "reform" program) to rot in a living Hell in one of the nation's great, historic cities.

One of the most revealing themes I saw in the dominant media's coverage was reporters saying "This Can't Be America" and "It's more like a Third World nation like Bangladesh or Baghdad." This frequent comment (and different versions thereof) on the part of numerous incredulous corporate media commentators and reporters minimizes the extreme levels of inequality, poverty, and related racial disparity and public sector starvation that have combined to produce desperate, practically "Third World" living conditions in places like New Orleans' Ninth Ward turning race and class into "matters of life and death" in such communities without the "sudden" intervention of inequality-exposing "natural" forces. Long before Katrina arrived to momentarily and partially dislodge the lid on the imperial race-class can, King's "triple evils" combined to consign much of the "world's greatest nation's" black citizens to sub-"First-World" circumstances in isolated, invisible, inner-city eyes of the world-capitalist hurricane.

### ***Guns, Butter, Knives, and Caviar***

So how has "the beacon's" national government been responding to the widely evident (for those who care to look) signs of homeland misery and inequity, readily visible before Tropical Storm and Societal Failure Katrina? A generation after King's assassination, it disgraces the now officially iconicized civil rights leader's all-too-forgotten and interrelated anti-imperialist and social-justice legacies by prioritizing militarism over social provision and health like no time in memory. As of December 21st, 2004, the National Priorities Project (NPP) reported, the Bush administration's imperial war of choice in Iraq had cost more than \$151 billion. With that same sum of money, the NPP calculated, the United States could have: enrolled 20,037,391 US children in Head Start for one year; provided health insurance for one year to 90,588,264 children; built 1,362,157 public housing units; and hired 2,621,749 additional public school teachers for one year.

In Illinois, where black children attend ghetto schools with class sizes too big for students to receive individual attention, the state's share of the war's cost could have paid for the building of 772 new elementary schools. The city of Chicago's share, NPP determined, could have paid for the hiring of 27,284 additional teachers for one year. Meanwhile, NPP reported, Title 1 programs to improve teaching and learning for disproportionately minority at-risk (poor) children fell more than \$7 million short of need. Federal allotments to Improve Teacher Quality fell \$245 million short and funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (for disadvantaged students and their families) fell \$1 billion short.

In a front-page article titled "Sharpening the Knife," the *Wall Street Journal* reported last Christmas season that US policymakers' concerns about the spectacular scale of the federal deficit meant less money in the national budget for education and other areas of social provision. The military, however, was exempted from federal fiscal blade, noted *Journal* reporter Jackie Calmes, who quoted New Hampshire Republican Senator Judd Gregg, Chairman of the U.S. Senate Budget Committee to chilling effect: "this cannot afford to be a guns and butter term," Gregg proclaimed. "You've got to cut the butter."

"With guns or military spending growing," Calmes calmly explained, "the butter to be cut is likely to include some of the most visible areas of domestic spending, including the Medicaid health program, subsidies to Amtrak, agricultural research, and even some federal education programs." "About 85 percent of the federal budget," including the military, was "untouchable by" what Calmes curiously called "public consensus." The "remaining discretionary funds and the areas Mr. Bush has targeted for shrinking," Calmes added, included

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"breast cancer research, aid to rural and inner-city schools, veterans medical care, weather forecasting, and park rangers" (Jackie Calmes, "Sharpening the Knife," Wall Street Journal, December 21, 2001, A1).

Here's how the National Priorities Project broke down the American tax bill last tax day (2005), by which time the costs of the miserably planned Iraqi action have well exceeded \$200 billion. Let's say you paid Uncle Sam \$1,000 last April. Your patriotic investment in the American public sector is being used as follows:

- \$299.68 goes to the military, what the federal government likes to call "defense" and what would more accurately be called "empire."
- \$202.74 goes to "health care": all health spending by the federal government, including federal spending on Medicare and Medicaid.
- \$186.03 goes to pay interest on the debt (which costs the nation \$317.3 billion each year), that is, to pay off domestic and international bond holders/global finance capital.
- \$65.82 goes to "income security," including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplementary Security Income, and various programs for families and kids.
- \$36.70 goes to education: all federal expenditures on elementary, secondary, higher education and federal research and general education assistance.
- \$34.38 goes to benefits for veterans.
- \$26.89 goes to nutrition spending: including Food Stamps and all child nutrition programs.
- \$21.44 goes to housing: all federal housing assistance.
- \$17.25 goes to environmental protection.
- \$9.37 goes to job training.
- \$105.15 goes to "other."

"Defense" (empire) outweighs education by more than 8 to 1; income security by more than 4.5 to 1; nutrition by more than 11 to 1; housing by 14 to 1; and job training by 32 to 1. The military accounts for more than half of all discretionary – not previously obligated – federal spending. The "defense" budget is more than \$600 billion when it is properly calculated to delete non-discretionary expenditures (like Social Security, which the Bush administration includes in its official federal budgetary pie-charts to claim that the military accounts for only 19 percent of federal expenditure) and to include continuing expenditures from past military programs and current "unbudgeted" allotments like the recent "supplement" for the War in Iraq.

And don't be fooled by the number two ranking for health care. Most of that \$202.74 is a transfer payment to the corporate-medical-industrial complex. As Paul Krugman noted in the *Times* last spring, US governmental per-capita health expenditures are higher than those of some nations with national health insurance plans (including France and Germany) because of America's inordinately high doctor salaries, skyrocketing drug prices in the US (where consumers flex little countervailing bargaining power against the market-setting capacity of the leading pharmaceutical corporations), and the flood of paper work and bureaucratic bloat in the private (corporate) "health" sector. That sector's legendary waste and excess comes partly at the expense of salaries, wages, and benefits for nurses, nurses' assistants, orderlies and other medical

staff.

Of course, federal policymakers might feel less compelled to choose between "guns" and "butter" if they weren't so dedicated to piling yet more tax cut caviar on the plates of the already super-opulent few in the industrialized world's most wealth-top-heavy state. By the end of last year, the total cost of the administration's tax reductions had reached \$297 billion, equivalent to 2.6 percent of the national Gross Domestic Product. Thanks largely to these historic tax cuts, federal revenues fell to their lowest level as a share of the American economy since 1950. They contributed to what the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) called a shift "from large budget surpluses to deficits as far as the eye can see."

By CBPP's calculation last winter, just 8.9 percent of Bush's "middle-class tax-cuts" went to the middle 20 percent of American income earning households. The wealthiest 1 percent received 24 percent of the cuts. Each household in the nation's top hundredth had received an average tax reduction of \$34,992.

Millionaire households, equivalent to 0.2 percent of all U.S. households, received 19.3 percent of the tax cuts to date by last year. These households enjoyed an average windfall reduction of \$123,592.

Of course, many of us were thinking about the massive public sector disablement that results from this deadly combination of war and tilted tax cuts as we watched the federal government fail to quickly help the victims of Katrina. We were upset to learn that the Bush administration had cut funding for Gulf Coast levee construction and maintenance. We cringed to learn that FEMA had been put on a military footing, making it all-too ill-suited to help homeland disaster victims and that many of the people who might have offered critical assistance were deployed in Bush's illegal and immoral Iraq war.

### ***The Now Thoroughly Unmatched "Purveyor of Violence in the World"***

Surely there must be a powerful military threat to the US to justify spending so much money on "guns," even as the "butter" is cruelly slashed in the face of rampant social need, yes? Not exactly. The US military budget is almost as high as the rest of the world's total "defense" expenditure. It is more than 8 times larger than the Chinese budget, the second largest spender. It is more than 29 times as large as the combined spending of the seven official "rogue" states (Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria) who together spent \$14.4 billion. It is more than the combined spending of the next twenty three nations.

The United States and its close allies account for two thirds to three-quarters of all military spending, depending on who you count as close allies (typically NATO countries, Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan and South Korea). The seven "rogue" enemies plus Russia and (long term Pentagon obsession) China together spend \$116.2 billion, equal to just 27.6% of the U.S. military budget. The current (2005) United States military budget is larger than the military budgets of the next twenty biggest spenders combined, and six times larger than China's.

Contrary to the notion that the nation's stupendous military spending is required to fight a defensive War on slippery, stateless Islamic Terrorism, most of America's military expenditure is concentrated in traditional Cold War-style weapons systems, forces, and bases. It sustains more than 700 overseas bases located in nearly ever country on the planet, not just the Middle East or the Muslim world. And the Pentagon quickly shifted its post-9/11 attack resources from Afghanistan to Iraq. The former nation was the more legitimate target for US planners who were concerned with "protecting America" by crushing terrorist networks. But Iraq was the real target (understood as such before the jetliner attacks) for planners who wished to use 9/11 as a pretext to demonstrate their ability to "operate on the global stage without constraint" (John Ikenberry), de-legitimize international law and institutions, crush "enemy" regimes, and deepen American control over Persian Gulf oil resources (and thereby over the rest of the world), even if this meant (ironically for a sincere "war on terror") increasing the lure and danger of extremist Muslim terrorism.

***“One Sector Has Held Up Quite Well”***

This massive military spending and its deadly recent applications have been terrible news for huge masses of people. The non-beneficiaries include the many tens of thousands of Iraqis (the conservative British public health journal *The Lancet* has projected 100,000 excess Iraqi civilian deaths between March 2003 and October 2004) who have died early because of the US invasion. Countless more Iraqis have been injured physically and otherwise in the stubborn Iraqi theater of Operation American Dominion. Also among the dreadful toll of victims are more than 2,000 dead American GIs, more than 20,000 injured (some quite horribly) US military personnel, and the as-yet uncounted mass of US soldiers coming back with Depleted Uranium poisoning and post-traumatic (among other) disorders.

Leading GI return communities face enormous mental health and family violence problems even as the Washington plutocrats slash funding for veteran services.

And, as Dr. King would certainly appreciate, millions of Americans and the nation's overall social health are paying a significant social "opportunity cost" for the money "their" government spends on war and empire instead of "social uplift."

There is one group of Americans and others, however, for whom the nation's perverse policy priorities are good news: leading investors in American "defense" corporations. Late last April, an enlightening CNN-Money dispatch (titled "Wall Street Has Embraced Defense Stocks") reported that military equities had become a shining jewel within a broadly bad stock market. "The reason," CNN-Money pointed out, is "fairly simple": "the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention an increased focus on homeland security." "Shares of the twenty U.S.-based defense companies with a market value of at least \$1 billion are up 30 percent," CNN noted, "during the past 12 months compared to just a 2 percent gain in the S&P 500."

In a generally poor investment climate, CNN reported, "one sector has held up quite well. And it's helping to prove that one of the most overused cliches of professional sports is actually applicable to investing: You can't win without a good defense." "In spite of clear budgetary constraints," one leading military funds manager explained, "there hasn't been any attempt to reign in defense spending."

"Something," as the left-liberation-theologian and activist Martin Luther King Jr. noted, "is wrong with [American state] capitalism."

***False Democrats***

So where's the supposedly "left" Democratic opposition to all this deadly American empire and inequality? Democratic Presidential candidate John F. Kerry defied much of his voter base last year by refusing to embrace withdrawal from America's illegal and immoral occupation of Iraq. The essential foreign policy message of his campaign was that he was the better, more sophisticated imperialist.

This message was reinforced by constant proud references to his direct youthful engagement in the vicious American war on Vietnam. It was seen also in the martial opening to his nomination acceptance speech, when Kerry saluted and announced that he was "reporting for duty."

Regarding domestic policy, Kerry had little to say about the glaring problem of poverty in "the world's richest nation." He focused his homeland social concern on the "plight of the middle class."

Consistent with his vast personal fortune, Kerry was silent about social inequality's lethal consequences (well understood by such leading past Americans as Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey) for political democracy in



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America. Sitting comfortably atop the nation's steep socioeconomic and racial pyramids, Kerry even proudly announced that he was "not a redistribution Democrat." To which some Americans, myself included, responded by saying (following Jefferson and Dewey), "then sir, you are no democrat at all."

Last spring, not a single Democratic Senator voted against the Bush administration's request for an additional \$82 billion to continue the miserable Iraq occupation. US Senator Barrack Obama (D–IL), who some "progressives" want to see as a peace and justice activist at heart, said that America had no choice but to sustain that murderous operation. He even approved the appointment of the mendacious petro–imperialist Condoleezza (Chevron) Rice (a key player, of course, in the launching of the murderous and badly bungled war on Iraq) as, of all things, Secretary of State. He has spoken favorably about the possible launching of "pre–emptive" missiles into Iran. Just one Democratic Congressperson – the progressive black Representative Cynthia McKinney (D–Georgia) – showed up to greet the 150,000 antiwar protestors who descended on Washington DC late last September.

### *Starving the Left and Feeding the Right–Hand of the State*

According to a widely advertised lament, progressive American change – the radical "reordering" and "restructuring" of governmental and societal priorities that King trumpeted as he brought his "Freedom Movement" to Chicago – is impossible because of the powerless and cash–strapped state. Government can't really do anything anymore, this complaint says, because it doesn't have the strength, the legitimacy, the money, and the wherewithal to carry out key objectives.

Tell it to America's disproportionately black mass of prisoners (in the world's leading incarceration state, with 2 million inmates and counting) and the many victims of its glorious overseas campaigns.

The lament is usefully broken down as myth when we ask whose objectives American government can and supposedly can't carry out. In "the wealthiest nation on earth," the public sector lacks the money to properly fund education for all of the country's children. It lacks the resources to provide universal health coverage, leaving 42 million American without basic medical insurance. It can't match unemployment benefits to the numbers out of work. It lacks or claims to lack the money to provide meaningful rehabilitation and reentry services for its many millions of very disproportionately black prisoners and ex–prisoners, marked for life with a criminal record. The list of unmet civic and social needs goes on and on.

Listen, however, to what our public sector "can" pay for. It can afford to spend trillions on Tax Cuts rewarding the top 1 percent in the disingenuous name of "economic stimulus" and helping "the middle class." It can spend more on the military than on all of America's possible "enemy" states combined many times over, providing massive subsidy to the high–tech corporate sector, including billions on weapons and "defense" systems that bear no meaningful relations to any real threat faced by the American people. It can afford hundreds of billions and perhaps more than a trillion dollars for an invasion and occupation of a distant devastated nation that poses minimal risk to the US and even to its own neighbors. And of course, it can afford to incapacitate and incarcerate a greater share of its population than any nation in history and to spend hundreds of millions each year on various forms of corporate welfare and other routine public subsidies to "private" industry.

The American public sector, in short, is weak and cash–strapped when it comes to social democracy for the people but its cup runs over in powerful ways when it comes to meeting the needs of wealth, social disparity and empire and when it comes to policing, punishing, and warehousing the poor.

It's useful to keep that distinction in mind when we hear people like the powerful Republican tax cut maven and political strategist Grover Norquist say that their goal – and here I quote Norquist – "is to cut government in half in twenty–five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub." When Norquist

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and his followers say they want to "starve the beast" of government, they target some parts of "government" for malnourishment a lot more energetically than others. They are most concerned to dismantle the parts of the public sector that serve the social and democratic needs of the non-affluent majority of the American populace. They want to de-fund what the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as the "left hand of the state," the programs and services that embody the victories won by past popular struggles for justice and equality. They want to reserve the right hand of the state, the parts that provide service and welfare to the privileged few.

### *The Spiritual Death of a Nation*

Their wishes are being met. With the help of a terrorist and imperialist "war on terror" and a spineless Democratic non-opposition, the Radically Regressive (and Repressive) Republicans and their many Democratic Party enablers are stripping the government of its positive social and democratic aspects. American public policy toward the poor and disadvantaged is increasingly reduced to policing and repressive "functions," which are expanding in ways that are more than merely coincidental to the assault on social supports and programs. State and society are criminalizing and thereby deepening social inequality and related social problems through self-fulfilling policies of racially disparate (racist) mass surveillance, arrest, and incarceration – a perfect homeland counterpart to America's racially disparate (racist) militarization of global US empire and its attendant social, political, and economic problems.

Market discipline and fiscal retrenchment are meant for the poor and the powerless; it's only the left hand of the state that must be "starved." The rich and powerful few are mainly exempt from market strictures and the sharpening of the public-fiscal knife. They are free to gorge themselves at the public trough, profiting from the amply fed and murderously flexing right hand of the racist, imperial, and mass-incarceratory state.

It's called the "spiritual death" of a nation that is still waiting to "get on the right side of the world revolution." The terrible social and health consequences at home and abroad are clear to all who care to look.

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