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The Two Americas

There are more billionaires than ever, while children and seniors go hungry and record numbers of families struggle in poverty. Nurses can help by passing the Robin Hood Tax.

AS 2012 DRAWS to a close, one anniversary received far too little attention in the recently concluded political season.

This year marked the 50th anniversary of a groundbreaking book, *The Other America*, by Michael Harrington, a searing examination of rampant poverty in the richest nation on earth. Historians have said that a widely reported review of Harrington's work in the *New Yorker* magazine was brought to the attention of then-President John F. Kennedy, and ultimately helped influence the Great Society reforms later launched by his successor Lyndon Johnson.

But half a century later, we seem to be back to square one.

When NNU launched our Nurses Campaign to Heal America (also known as our Main Street campaign), it was spurred in large part by the alarming spike in patients presenting in hospital emergency rooms and clinics across the country who were having to choose among paying medical bills, paying their rent or mortgage, or feeding their families.

It was not an aberration. By 2011, with the recent recession showing scant signs of abating, official poverty figures had soared to nearly 50 million Americans.

Some in the political arena tend to pigeonhole poverty by race, but this calamity crosses all lines of gender, geography, age, and ethnicity.

Last year, almost one in four children lived in a family that regularly has difficulty affording sufficient food, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. On the other end of life, 8.3 million people over 60 in 2010 faced the threat of hunger, up 78 percent from a decade earlier (a statistic the policy makers certainly need to think long and hard over before making fiscal cliff cuts to seniors).

Hunger and malnutrition, as nurses will

attest, leads to a broad array of health problems, ranging from reduced immunity to disease or even organ failure. For children, poor nutrition can severely stunt cognitive development and growth. For adults and seniors, the consequences can include more chronic illnesses and shorter life spans.

More than 20 million Americans live in extreme poverty—with cash incomes as low as \$10,000 a year for a family of four. Is it any wonder that the United States has the third-highest poverty rate out of 30 leading industrial nations?

As nationally syndicated broadcaster Tavis Smiley, who in September embarked on a Poverty Tour with Professor Cornell West, put it, “You have three classes of poor people: the perennially poor, folks who’ve been stuck in poverty; you have the near-poor, folks who are just a paycheck or two away, low-income; and the new poor, the former middle class. So many middle-class Americans of all races, all colors, and all creeds have fallen into poverty because of corporate greed and because of political indifference.”

And, of course, decades of economic and political policies that have resulted in a massive shift of national wealth from working people to the corporate boardrooms and the yacht owners.

Today, according to *Bloomberg Markets* magazine, 200 billionaires have a net worth of \$2.7 trillion, about the gross domestic product of France. In contrast, real wage growth for workers has stagnated for 30 years, median household income has steadily fallen since the Wall Street-produced economic crash of 2008, and much of the limited job growth has been in the lowest-wage sectors, primarily food service and retail.

When Smiley and West launched their Poverty Tour, it was an effort to get the attention of the presidential candidates on eradicating poverty. But the issue sadly remained

as invisible on the campaign trail as it was when Harrington shocked the nation in 1962.

However, it is not a shock to nurses who see every day the faces of poverty and the suffering of families left behind even as corporate profits once again soar and the parties and good times are back on Wall Street.

With all the enormous wealth in our nation, we really can do something about poverty and the overall economic morass that continues to plague not just the unemployed, or those working two or three jobs flipping hamburgers in Main Street towns and cities from coast to coast.

Nurses have a solution. It is the genesis of our campaign. Everyone deserves a good job at living wages; guaranteed healthcare based on patient need, not on ability to pay; equal access to quality education; a clean and healthy environment.

And despite the obsession of too many politicians in Washington and many state capitals with inflicting more austerity programs on already hard-hit communities, there is a fairly simple way to pay for it—the Robin Hood Tax.

Our campaign to tax Wall Street speculation, embodied in Rep. Keith Ellison's HR 6411, could generate up to \$350 billion every year, an amount that could save more than 1.7 million homes from foreclosure, or finance 9 million new jobs at current average wage levels.

Or it could fund the food plans of 24 million families of four for a year or lift all 3.8 million female-headed households out of poverty for nearly a decade.

The “Other America” is all of us, and it is up to all of us to end this disgrace. I personally urge each and everyone one of you to get further engaged in our Nurses Campaign to Heal America. ■

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