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HOMELESS

A FIVE HUNDRED MILLION DOLLAR BILL TO AID THE NATION'S HOMELESS WAS INTRODUCED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON JANUARY 9. THE MEASURE WOULD INCREASE EMERGENCY SUPPORT, IMPROVE HEALTH CARE AND CONSIDER SURPLUS GOVERNMENT PROPERTIES FOR TEMPORARY HOUSING. LEADERS OF A VIGIL IN WASHINGTON, D.C. THAT WAS DESIGNED TO PROMPT AND SUPPORT LEGISLATIVE ACTION FOR THE HOMELESS SAID THAT THEY WOULD END THE VIGIL. MICHAEL STOOPS, BOARD CHAIRMAN OF THE BURNSIDE COMMUNITY COUNCIL IN PORTLAND WAS ONE OF THE HOMELESS ACTIVISTS AND HOMELESS PEOPLE WHO STARTED THE VIGIL IN FRONT OF THE NATIONAL CAPITOL ON THANKSGIVING DAY. THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE IS BY WILLIAM NEWTON, WHO IS A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE CLATSOP COUNTY COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCY AND WHO HELPED ESTABLISH THREE TEMPORARY SHELTERS IN CLATSOP AND TILLAMOOK COUNTIES.

by William Newton

THE SUM TOTAL

by Peter Marin

The trouble begins with the word "homeless." It has become such an abstraction, and is applied to so many different kinds of people, with so many different histories and problems, that it is almost meaningless.

Homelessness, in itself, is nothing more than a condition visited upon men and women (and, increasingly, children) as the final stage of a variety of problems about which the word "homelessness" tells us almost nothing. Or, to put it another way, it is a catch basin into which pour all of the people disenfranchised or marginalized or scared off by processes beyond their control, those which lie close to the heart of American life. Here are the groups packed into the single category of "the homeless":

- Veterans, mainly from the war in Viet Nam. In many American cities, vets make up close to fifty percent of all homeless males.

- The mentally ill. In some parts of the country, roughly a quarter of the homeless would, a couple of decades ago, have been institutionalized.

- The physically disabled or chronically ill, who do not receive any benefits or whose benefits do not enable them to afford permanent shelter.

- The elderly on fixed incomes whose funds are no longer sufficient for their needs.

- Men, women, and whole families pauperized by the loss of a job.

- Single parents, usually women, without the resources or skills to establish new lives.

- Runaway children, many of whom have been abused.

- Alcoholics and those in trouble with drugs (whose troubles often begin with one of the other conditions listed here).

- Immigrants, both legal and illegal, who often are not counted among the homeless

because they constitute a "problem" in their own right.

- Traditional tramps, hobos, and transients who have taken to the road or the streets for a variety of reasons and who prefer to be there.

You can quickly learn two things about the homeless from this list. First, you can learn that many of the homeless, before they were homeless, were people more or less like ourselves: members of the working or middle class. And you can learn that the world of the homeless has its roots in various policies, events, and ways of life for which some of us are responsible and from which some of us actually prosper.

We decide, as a people, to go to war, we ask our children to kill and to die, and the result, years later, is grown men homeless on the street.

We change, with the best intentions, the laws pertaining to the mentally ill, and then, without intention, neglect to provide them with services; and the result, in our streets, drives some of us crazy with rage.

We cut taxes and prune budgets, we modernize industry and shift the balance of trade, and the result of all these actions and errors can be read, sleeping form by sleeping form, on our city streets.

The liberals cannot blame the conservatives. The conservatives cannot blame the liberals. Homelessness is the sum total of our dreams, policies, intentions, errors, omissions, cruelties, kindnesses, all of it recorded, in flesh, in the life of the streets.

From "Helping and Hating the Homeless: The Struggle at the Margins of America," published in Harper's magazine. Peter Marin is currently completing a book about homelessness.

When the first major coldfront hit the nation last November, I heard several directors of various homeless shelter programs say on national television, "We just weren't prepared for the numbers of homeless that showed up when the cold weather began." Why not? The problem is that we do not know how many millions are homeless, and no one is sufficiently prepared to meet the daily growing need. The key to proper preparation is escalation of effort: to serve the homeless in America increased preparation must be done daily; fundraising, food scavenging, contact work, media development, program development, networking all must be a continuum. The work can never slacken because the numbers of homeless grow daily. So must the efforts of those who would serve the homeless.

It seems that no matter how broad the media coverage, the extent of conversation or demonstrations, no one, not even the people who direct the assistance programs seem to believe that the problem of homelessness is advancing steadily and relentlessly up the numbers scale. We fail to realize its extent due to some inane hope that everything will get better.

1987 has been declared "The Year of the Homeless by the United Nations. It is estimated that this year another 2.7 million will be made homeless in the United States.

The homeless will not simply go away or follow the orders to "get out of here", as many cold, insensitive people would wish. Go away! To where?

The homeless in America — which includes the northwest Oregon coast, though many try to deny it — are trying to survive in the land that many of them fought for and helped build. Most of the homeless are U.S. citizens, but it doesn't matter; more importantly they are human beings. No human being should face the elements of nature without shelter, nor a day without food. The homeless in America could all have shelter, food, medical care, jobs and reasonably good lives on what is spent on decadence by the holders of wealth in America (A single bottle of wine was recently sold for fifty-seven thousand dollars!).

A recent art show in New York displayed the art of the homeless in America. I see this as significant. The homeless, god forbid, are emerging as a subculture. The art of