



There was an interesting little piece in the paper the other day. There are now 169 billionaires in America. Had anyone asked, we'd have guessed fifty, maybe seventy-five. Not because we underestimate the naked greed of life at the top of the food chain, but because a billion dollars is a whale of a lot of money.

Most of us dream of having a million. A million dollars is itself a huge bundle of money. If, for instance, one skipped lunch and managed to save \$50,000 a year, it would take twenty years to become a millionaire. By reverse arithmetic, if one spent \$50,000 a year in ways that left nothing to show for it but memories, it would be twenty years before you were broke. For the average peasant, a million dollars is a dream worth dreaming.

A billion dollars is this dream magnified a thousandfold. A billion dollars is more pictures of dead presidents than you can count in a lifetime. A billion dollars deposited in a passbook account would earn, by its mere existence, \$45 million dollars a year in interest. It is perhaps a measure of our country's greatness that there are 169 Americans who could make such a deposit tomorrow morning.

The existence of so much as one billionaire, even in America, is a wonder. Being a billionaire means that, living expenses aside, the sweat of your cleverness and talent has earned you a thousand million dollars in sheer profit. Interesting word, profit. Profit means making more than you spend, accumulating more than you disburse, absorbing more than you emit, taking more than you give. Among some cultures, profit is indistinguishable from theft. But these are backward cultures and of no consequence.

Mind you we have nothing against profit. We have, in fact, nothing but praise for it. Like you, we live on profit. We go to the movies, save our little nest egg, and plan our quaint peasant future on the foundation of beating our skull against the nearest wall to make more money than we need. If all goes well, we'll retire someplace nice to have our stroke. Profit is the reward for fiscal virtue. But no matter how hard you work, how very good your work is, or how many coupons you clip, it's doubtful you'll sock away a billion dollars. Not even plumbers are that virtuous.

When you get right down to it, it's hard to imagine how anyone could come by a billion dollars honestly. If something like that happened in a poker game, someone would get shot. Nobody but nobody is that lucky or that good. That America has 169 billionaires means the deck is stacked and someone's got rules they're not showing.

A truth that doesn't make the headlines much is that at no point in our country's history has its wealth been less evenly divided. Something like 95% of the chips are passed back and forth between something like 5% of the players. This doesn't make for good poker. In fact, it ends the game. Economists and historians who don't use the word 'crisis' lightly say we may be in a whole lot of trouble. To the blind, everything's a surprise. One hesitates to suggest we eat the rich, although for many Americans it would mean upgrading their diet. We'd be happy if they just paid the sort of taxes that made them millionaires. Call us a communist.

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