

OPINION

Obama Gets It, But Needs Our Help

Jobs first; deficit second

BY EDITH RASELL

Obama gets it. His State of the Union message showed he understands the problems faced by millions of Americans.

He knows that nearly one in five people who want to work can't find a job or can only find part-time work. He knows that one in nine families cannot make the minimum payment on their credit cards, that one in seven mortgages is either in default or foreclosure, and that one in eight Americans is on food stamps.

The speech also showed that President Obama is continuing to mobilize his administration to tackle the nation's severe problems. He proposed a number of measures to create jobs. He also proposed a new

fee on big banks, a revised program to prevent foreclosures, and other measures that will speed the end of the economic crisis and make life easier for many who are suffering.

But the speech also showed that Obama is still too influenced by advisors who promote the failed policies of the past. Currently the

large deficit is the only tool that can repair the economy. Once things are somewhat back to normal, which probably won't be for two to three years, then we can worry about reducing the deficit.

But Obama is already proposing budget cuts starting in the fall of this year. Not only are the cuts

but it pays for many things people care about deeply, from education and the environment to air traffic control, nutrition, and the national parks. Entirely excluded from the proposed cuts are the military and homeland security.

Over the next 11 years (2009-2019), the federal government deficit will total an estimated \$11.8 trillion. The Stimulus Bill and costs of the bailout are just 14 percent of this, while 26 percent is due to the higher costs and lost revenue associated with the economic downturn. But fully 45 percent of the total is due to the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003, and 15 percent is the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Money to reduce the deficit should come from ending the tax cuts and bringing the wars in the Middle East to an end, not from

programs that cost relatively little and serve so many.

For the next few years, the nation and especially the unemployed need a large budget deficit and the jobs it will create. In later years, the burden of reducing the budget deficit should fall on those who benefited from the excesses of recent years.

Obama gets it. But that's not enough. As he said in his speech, democracy can be noisy, messy, and complicated. Well, it's time for caring people to get very noisy, jump into the mess, and make life in Washington very complicated. The health of our nation is at stake, as well as the well-being of millions of our friends and neighbors around the country.

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The nation and especially the unemployed need a large budget deficit and the jobs it will create.

most heated debate in Washington is over the size of the federal budget deficit.

With sky-high unemployment and interest rates essentially at zero,

premature but what he proposes to cut -- non-security discretionary spending -- is also wrong-headed. This category of spending comprises only 14 percent of the budget

Why We Need to Help Jobless Youth

Heading off tragic consequences

BY SHIRLEY SAGAWA

While high unemployment plagues communities across the country, a large and growing population of young people has so little hope of finding a job.

The employment of teens is at a historic low. And the hardest hit are minority male and low-income teens. Following a long decline over the last decade, the employment rate of black teens is less than 14 percent and for low-income Latino teens just 23 percent. Young adults, aged 20 to 24, fare slightly better, but both groups are far more likely to be unemployed.

The consequences of teen unemployment may seem less important than for unemployed adults, but the long-term impact may be dire. Even part-time work is often a stepping stone to future employment. Without dramatic steps, low-income minority teens won't be helped by any future recovery. They could end up permanently economically marginalized.

According to a study by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies, these young

people are likely to face deep long-term declines in their employability, earnings, family issues, and marriage rates. As a result, they are likely to impose serious fiscal burdens on the rest of society associated with low lifetime earnings, lessened tax contributions and higher correctional costs.

History points to a strategy to head off these tragic consequences. At the height of the Great Depression, two million young men roamed the country in a futile search for work to help support their families. President Franklin Roosevelt recognized this human disaster in the making and created the Civilian Conservation Corps or CCC, which took advantage of this itinerant labor pool to build lasting monuments, parks, and trails, and undertake large-scale conservation efforts that America benefits from to this day.

But the larger legacy of this program was in human terms. Millions of families lived off the small stipends paid to CCC corps members, who received \$30 a month but typically sent \$25 of it home.

Even more important was that these young men developed the work and civic skills that made them the heroic soldiers who fought World War II.

Like the Great Depression's young men, today's disconnected youth number in the millions and the number is growing. The percentage of Americans age 20 to 24

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who are neither in school nor working jumped over 10 percentage points in just two years, reaching 28 percent in 2009.

Disconnected teens and young adults are the prime targets of the CCC-style programs that exist today in the form of YouthBuild and service and conservation corps, which offer education toward a GED or diploma and the chance to develop job skills while serving the community, along with a rich

array of supports that help disconnected youth move away from crime, drugs, and other risks to become productive citizens. Many programs also provide AmeriCorps education awards to set young people on a path to postsecondary education.

These programs work. A study by Abt Associates and Brandeis

University confirmed the value of youth service and conservation corps for young people, especially for African-American men. The programs increased their employment and earnings, educational aspirations, associate's degree attainment, and community involvement.

But while the Depression-era CCC engaged three million young men, today fewer than 30,000 similar youth corps positions exist.

The CCC scaled up to 250,000

positions in just four months. With adequate public resources and building on the base of high-quality programs already operating across the country we could, at a minimum, double the capacity of the current youth corps, YouthBuild, and AmeriCorps field and train youth for a wide range of high-need fields, from green construction jobs to health care.

The jobs bill passed by the House providing funding for additional AmeriCorps positions is a good first step. The president's budget also offers a substantial increase in AmeriCorps, to add 20,000 new positions, and an increase in YouthBuild funding to engage several hundred additional corps members.

In the face of frozen domestic discretionary spending, these increases are welcome. But in the face of the need, Congress should do more by scaling up both these programs more dramatically and creating a new dedicated funding stream for youth service and conservation corps.

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