

“The Unmentionable and Unspeakable”

by

B.B. Robinson, Ph.D.

How and when will the nation narrow its growing trade deficit? As a result of that deficit, will the dollar experience a precipitous decline in the future? Will Social Security be there when you retire? Can all defined benefit pension funds be rescued as companies abandon them at rapid rates? Are we destined to spend increasing proportions of our income on healthcare? Although we have innovated our way out of crises in the past, suppose we are unable to identify adequate solutions to our energy problems in the years ahead? Will energy have to be rationed?

These are just a few questions that come to mind when we consider issues that may require tremendous amounts of future resources to resolve. All of the foregoing issues are important and probably touch each of our lives. If push comes to shove, we may not mind rolling up our sleeves to help resolve them. It makes sense to pitch in and help those who have lived productive lives and who have contributed to America's growth and prosperity.

Would you feel the same way about rescuing those who have not contributed so positively to America's development? Probably not.

I arrived at a similar conclusion a few days ago when I read a *USA Today* news story by Kevin Johnson. He quoted a recently released Pew Charitable Trust report that stated the U.S. prison population would increase 13% by 2011. The report indicated that this increased level of prisoners would add \$27.5 billion to the cost of constructing and operating prisons in 2011. In 2005, the last year for which data are available, the nation spent over \$72 billion on prisons.

What do these statistics have to do with Black Americans—the focus of most of these commentaries? It has everything to do with Black Americans; particularly circumstances that may evolve to create unspeakable outcomes. Remember that, according to a 2005 U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics report, 40% of the incarcerated population in America is Black. Blacks constitute only about 12% of the U.S. population.

I ask you to think about what decision you would make if you were short of resources. Would you feed, clothe, and keep warm those productive and contributing members of society, or would you deny them in favor of those who have been menaces to society? Is this a no-brainer decision?

So what happens when resources run short and the society cannot provide adequately for all of its population: Free and incarcerated? Choices have to be made. The unmentionable could occur.

If the unspeakable occurs, do you lose a father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, or cousin?

Some argue that the foregoing scenario is important, but that it is not as immediate as a crisis that is evolving in prisons today that affects Black Americans so adversely; i.e., the contraction of HIV AIDS by prisoners who are released to spread the disease among unincarcerated Black Americans.

Both of these scenarios are painful. Both require attention. I plan to discuss possible economic responses to these conundrums in future commentaries. However, when cost is a key factor in Americans' unwillingness to spend about \$100 billion a year to fight the war on terrorism, you have to begin to ask, "When will \$100 billion be too much to spend to maintain prisoners?"

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