

A PART OF THE PROBLEM

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ONLY the inimitable Victor Borge would have "an uncle who once invented a cure for which there is no known disease." But all of us can claim an "uncle" who is adept at formulating answers without knowing what the problem is; and "Uncle Sam's" favorite answer is, "Subsidy!"

In fairness to "Uncle," it may be conceded that his failure to identify problems clearly could be a shortcoming picked up from various of his nieces and nephews. It happens to the best of us!

For example, what about all these victims of poverty we see throughout the world? Blessed as we are today with our fast cars and planes and instantaneous radar and television entry into the most remote corners, we can detect the first pangs of hunger or the slightest sigh of suffering or hardship, in a matter of seconds, it seems, from anywhere on earth. Previously, when a man's "world" was little larger than he could circumscribe conveniently on foot

or horseback, his chances of spotting anyone much poorer or hungrier than himself were not great. And if there were a neighbor in need, it was not so difficult to figure out just what he needed and how to help him. In those days, if a farmer lacked a plow, none of his friends would have thought of giving him a fully automated steel mill.¹ If no one had an extra plow to give, at least someone would be willing to lend the tool in exchange for some help with the corn at harvest time.

If a family were really up against it, perhaps with illness and a shortage of food in the dead of winter, it wouldn't have been considered real neighborly to send over a "relief" check and a promise of more when needed. A nearby housewife might drop in with a pot of stew, and spend some time nursing the sick and tidying up the cabin before returning

¹ See "Statism and the Free Market" by Sudha R. Shenoy, *THE FREEMAN*, May 1962, p. 44.

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home. And the expectation would be, in most cases, that when the stew kettle eventually was returned to its owner, it would contain a freshly baked pound cake or some repayment in kind. Or, a neighbor would stop to see if one of the boys from the needy family might be able to spend a few weeks helping with the chores at the neighbor's place — for his room and board, and perhaps a chance for some schooling.

There is an art to helping a person help himself, of being charitable toward anyone without damaging his self-respect and sense of self-responsibility. When those one would aid are close to home, well known and loved and respected, the temptation to be rash or careless in rendering aid is diminished. A friend's life and character is at stake, and the problem can be more clearly seen as not simply a need to fill his belly but a way for him to earn self-respect and a reason for living.

Contrast this with the modern method of perceiving poverty from a jet or helicopter or through a picture tube, a telescopic view of multitudes of strangers, too numerous to be counted or cared for one by one, too much of a job for any one neighbor.

The picture is accurate enough;

these are actual human beings who are hungry, homeless, ragged, diseased, illiterate. Their sad plight is real and evokes the sympathy of all who observe their condition. But feeding a starving multitude is no job for a friendly housewife with a kettle of stew. An individual, yes, or perhaps several members of a family can be cared for by any one of us — but viewing the problem en masse tends to conceal the fact that it still is the individual who suffers hunger, disease, privation. It is the individual who needs a purpose in life and a way to earn his own living — a way to achieve *his* purpose. Populating the earth with purposeless creatures is a goal unworthy of any human being; yet, this would seem to be the tendency inherent in most of the so-called charitable programs of the welfare state.

Aside from the case of hopeless cripples and invalids for whom others may care, poverty is a continuing problem only (1), to individuals who have no incentive to rise above that challenge, and (2), to those who take it upon themselves to perpetuate the situation through irresponsible subsidies. Of these two aspects of the problem, the latter is probably the more serious. ♦