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Oblivious in D.C.

By **BOB HERBERT**

Of all the challenges we face, none is more troubling than the fact that thousands of Oregonians — many of them children — don't have enough to eat. Oregon has the highest hunger rate in the nation."

— Gov. Ted Kulongoski, in his State of the State address.

Those who still believe that the policies of the Bush administration will set in motion some kind of renaissance in Iraq should take a look at what's happening to the quality of life for ordinary Americans here at home.

The president, buoyed by the bountiful patronage of the upper classes, seems indifferent to the increasingly harsh struggles of the working classes and the poor.

As Mr. Bush moves from fund-raiser to fund-raiser, building the mother of all campaign stockpiles, states from coast to coast are reaching depths of budget desperation unseen since the Great Depression. The disconnect here is becoming surreal. On Thursday the National Governors Association let it be known that the fiscal crisis that has crippled one state after another is worsening, not getting better.

Taxes have been raised. Services have been cut. And the rainy day funds accumulated in the 1990's have been consumed. If help does not materialize soon — in the form of assistance from the federal government or a sharp turnaround in the economy — some states will fall into a fiscal abyss.

That already seems to be happening in places like California, which has been driven to its knees by a two-year \$38.8 billion budget gap, and Oregon, which has seen drastic cuts in public school services and the withholding of potentially life-saving medicine from seriously ill patients.

Most states have been unable to protect even the most fundamental services from damaging budget cuts.

"Few states have succeeded in exempting high-priority programs such as K-12 education, Medicaid, higher education, public safety or aid to cities and towns," according to the compilers of the Fiscal Survey of States, a report produced jointly by the governors' association and the National Association of State Budget Officers.

Scott Pattison, director of the budget officers' group, said, "If economic conditions remain stagnant or worsen, and if budget shortfalls continue next year, the states will have exhausted many of their options for countering a weak economy."

The budget crisis in California, where an unpopular Democratic governor is politically paralyzed and the Republicans in the State Legislature refuse to consider raising taxes, is potentially catastrophic.

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Jack Kyser, a public policy economist in Los Angeles told The Associated Press: "People are nervous. There's a real chance for a meltdown that could have rippling effects throughout the nation. This is something of a different magnitude than we've seen before."

The governors' association called the fiscal survey the most accurate gauge of the health of state budgets. Its discouraging findings were released as the president was preparing a fund-raising swing that added millions more to his campaign stockpile, and as the Internal Revenue Service was reporting that the nation's richest taxpayers were accumulating an even greater share of the nation's wealth.

Some Americans are missing meals and going without their medicine, while others are enjoying a surge in already breathtaking levels of wealth. So what are we doing? We're cutting aid to the former while showering government largess on the latter.

There's a reason those campaign millions keep coming and coming and coming.

A Times article last week noted that the wealthiest 400 taxpayers accounted for more than 1 percent of all the income in the United States in 2000, "more than double their share just eight years earlier."

The influence of the wealthy has always been great, but it hasn't always been so cruel. Especially in the past six or seven decades there were many powerful political and civic leaders who looked out for the interests of the less fortunate and pressed their claims for treatment that was reasonably fair.

That's changed. The Bush juggernaut, at least for the time being, is rolling over everything that dares to get in its way. And fairness is not something it is concerned about.

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