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Trouble in Bush's America

By **BOB HERBERT**

While our "What, me worry?" president is having a great time with his high approval ratings and his "Top Gun" fantasies, the economy remains in the tank. And the finances of state and local governments are sinking tragically into ever deeper and ever more unforgiving waters.

You want shock and awe? Come to New York City, where jobs are hard to find and the budget (as residents are suddenly realizing) is a backbreaking regimen of service cuts, tax increases and that perennial painkiller, wishful thinking.

The biggest wish, of course, is that the national economy will suddenly turn around and flood the city and state with desperately needed revenues. Meanwhile, the soup kitchens and food pantries are besieged.

"This is the worst situation I've been in," said Alfonso Shynvwelski, an unemployed waiter who stood in a long line of people waiting for food at the Washington Heights Ecumenical Food Pantry on Broadway in upper Manhattan. Mr. Shynvwelski, 36, has worked at a number of upscale restaurants, including the Russian Tea Room, which has closed. He's been unemployed for a year.

"It's the first time in my life I've had to look for food this way," he said.

This lament is being heard more and more often in the city, which has an official jobless rate of nearly 9 percent. The real rate is substantially higher, which means that more than 1 in 10 New Yorkers who would like to work cannot find a job.

Last week Local 46 of the Metallic Lathers Union announced that it would allow 200 people to apply for membership, which would mean a shot at high-paying work. The line of applicants began at Third Avenue and 76th Street and almost circled the block. The earliest arrivals waited in line for three days. They slept on the sidewalk.

In George Bush's America, jobs get erased like chalk marks on a blackboard. More than 2 million have vanished on Mr. Bush's watch. There are now more than 10.2 million unemployed workers in the U.S., including 1.4 million who are not officially counted because they've become discouraged and stopped looking.

There are also 4.8 million men and women who are working part time because they can't find full-time jobs.

John Challenger, the chief executive of the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, offered a cautionary word to the wishful thinkers who insist that prosperity is just around the corner. "The sharp increase in the job cuts last month," Mr. Challenger said, "should serve as a warning that it is premature to conclude that the quick end to the war in Iraq will bring a quick turnaround in the economy and job market."

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The high unemployment and sharply reduced social services are having devastating consequences. In some cases people are being driven to destitution.

"This is a really spooky time for us," said John Hoffmann, who runs a food pantry and soup kitchen in the Bronx. He's faced with both a surge in demand and, because of government budget cuts, a threat to his financing.

"These are folks who are new to services like ours," Mr. Hoffmann said of his latest wave of clients. Many of them are working men and women who were struggling to support their families from one paycheck to the next. When workers in that situation are laid off, they have nothing to fall back on.

Nearly a quarter of a million jobs have been lost in New York City in the past two and a half years. Taxes are going up and services are going down — and still that is not enough. Similar scenarios are being played out in city and state governments throughout the country.

California is trying to borrow its way out of a nightmarish crisis. Texas, already near the bottom nationally in social services, is heading further south.

Two forms of help from the federal government are needed. One is direct assistance to local governments to help alleviate the disastrous budget shortfalls. The other is an economic stimulus program that really works, that boosts the economy and creates jobs through investments in some of the nation's real needs, rather than simply transferring trainloads of money to the wealthy in the form of tax cuts.

Mr. Bush has no interest in such remedies. Easing the economic struggles of poor and working families in America is not part of his agenda.

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