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Hunger Games, U.S.A.

By PAUL KRUGMAN

Something terrible has happened to the soul of the Republican Party. We've gone beyond bad economic doctrine. We've even gone beyond selfishness and special interests. At this point we're talking about a state of mind that takes positive glee in inflicting further suffering on the already miserable.

The occasion for these observations is, as you may have guessed, the monstrous farm bill the House passed last week.

For decades, farm bills have had two major pieces. One piece offers subsidies to farmers; the other offers nutritional aid to Americans in distress, mainly in the form of food stamps (these days officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP).

Long ago, when subsidies helped many poor farmers, you could defend the whole package as a form of support for those in need. Over the years, however, the two pieces diverged. Farm subsidies became a fraud-ridden program that mainly benefits corporations and wealthy individuals. Meanwhile food stamps became a crucial part of the social safety net.

So House Republicans voted to maintain farm subsidies — at a higher level than either the Senate or the White House proposed — while completely eliminating food stamps from the bill.

To fully appreciate what just went down, listen to the rhetoric conservatives often use to justify eliminating safety-net programs. It goes something like this: "You're personally free to help the poor. But the government has no right to take people's money" — frequently, at this point, they add the words "at the point of a gun" — "and force them to give it to the poor."

It is, however, apparently perfectly O.K. to take people's money at the point of a gun and force them to give it to agribusinesses and the wealthy.

Now, some enemies of food stamps don't quote libertarian philosophy; they quote the Bible instead. Representative Stephen Fincher of Tennessee, for example, cited the New Testament: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." Sure enough, it turns out that Mr. Fincher has personally received millions in farm subsidies.

Given this awesome double standard — I don't think the word "hypocrisy" does it justice — it seems almost anti-climactic to talk about facts and figures. But I guess we must.

So: Food stamp usage has indeed soared in recent years, with the percentage of the population receiving stamps rising from 8.7 in 2007 to 15.2 in the most recent data. There is, however, no

mystery here. SNAP is supposed to help families in distress, and lately a lot of families have been in distress.

In fact, SNAP usage tends to track broad measures of unemployment, like U6, which includes the underemployed and workers who have temporarily given up active job search. And U6 more than doubled in the crisis, from about 8 percent before the Great Recession to 17 percent in early 2010. It's true that broad unemployment has since declined slightly, while food stamp numbers have continued to rise — but there's normally some lag in the relationship, and it's probably also true that some families have been forced to take food stamps by sharp cuts in unemployment benefits.

What about the theory, common on the right, that it's the other way around — that we have so much unemployment thanks to government programs that, in effect, pay people not to work? (Soup kitchens caused the Great Depression!) The basic answer is, you have to be kidding. Do you really believe that Americans are living lives of leisure on \$134 a month, the average SNAP benefit?

Still, let's pretend to take this seriously. If employment is down because government aid is inducing people to stay home, reducing the labor force, then the law of supply and demand should apply: withdrawing all those workers should be causing labor shortages and rising wages, especially among the low-paid workers most likely to receive aid. In reality, of course, wages are stagnant or declining — and that's especially true for the groups that benefit most from food stamps.

So what's going on here? Is it just racism? No doubt the old racist canards — like Ronald Reagan's image of the “strapping young buck” using food stamps to buy a T-bone steak — still have some traction. But these days almost half of food stamp recipients are non-Hispanic whites; in Tennessee, home of the Bible-quoting Mr. Fincher, the number is 63 percent. So it's not all about race.

What is it about, then? Somehow, one of our nation's two great parties has become infected by an almost pathological meanspiritedness, a contempt for what CNBC's Rick Santelli, in the famous rant that launched the Tea Party, called “losers.” If you're an American, and you're down on your luck, these people don't want to help; they want to give you an extra kick. I don't fully understand it, but it's a terrible thing to behold.