

The Future of Work in America

By Jeremy Rifkin 3000A

WILL THERE be a job for me in the new information age?" This is the question that most worries American voters — and the question that American politicians seem most determined to sidestep. President Clinton warns workers that they will have to be retrained six or seven times during their work lives to match the dizzying speed of technological change. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich talks about the "end of the traditional job" and advises every American worker to become his or her own independent contractor.

But does the president really think 124 million Americans can reinvent themselves every five years to keep up with a high-tech marketplace? Does Gingrich honestly believe every American can become a free-lance entrepreneur, continually hustling contracts for short-term work assignments?

Buffeted by these unrealistic employment expectations, American workers are increasingly sullen and pessimistic. Most Americans have yet to recover from the recovery of 1993-1995, which was essentially a "jobless" recovery. While corporate profits are heading through the roof, average families struggle to keep a roof over their heads. More than one-fifth of the workforce is trapped in temporary assignments or works only part time. Millions of others have slipped quietly out of the economy and into an underclass no longer counted in the permanent employment figures. A staggering 15 percent of the population now lives below the official poverty line.

Both Clinton and Gingrich have asked

Americans workers to remain patient. They explain that declining incomes represent only short-term adjustments. Democrats and Republicans alike beseech the faithful to place their trust in the high-tech future — to journey with them into cyberspace and become pioneers on the new electronic frontier. Their enthusiasm for technological marvels has an almost camp right to it. If you didn't know better, you might suspect Mickey and Pluto were taking you on a guided tour through Epcot Center.

Jittery and genuinely confused over the yawning gap between the official optimism of politicians and their own personal plight, middle- and working-class American families seem to be holding on to a tiny thread of hope that the vast productivity gains of the high-tech revolution will somehow "trickle down" to them in the form of better jobs, wages and benefits. That thread is likely to break by election time if, as I anticipate, the economy skids right by the soft landing predicted by the Federal Reserve Board and crashes headlong into a deep recession.

The psychological impact of a serious downturn coming so quickly upon the heels of the last one would be devastating. It is likely to set the framework for a politically wild roller-coaster ride for the rest of the decade, opening the door not only to new parties but to extralegal forms of politics.

Meanwhile, few politicians and economists are paying attention to the underlying causes — dare we say it? — the new "malaise" gripping the country. Throughout the current welfare reform debate, for example, members of both parties have trotted onto the House and

Senate floors to urge an end to welfare and demand that all able-bodied men and women find jobs. Maverick Senator Paul Simon, D-Ill., has been virtually alone in raising the troubling question: "What Jobs?"

The hard reality is that the global economy is in the midst of a transformation as significant as the Industrial Revolution. We are in the early stages of a shift from "mass labor" to highly skilled "elite labor," accompanied by increasing automation in the production of goods and delivery of services. Sophisticated computers, robots, telecommunications and other Information Age technologies are replacing human beings in nearly every sector. Factory workers, secretaries, receptionists, clerical workers, sales clerks, bank tellers, telephone operators, librarians, wholesalers and middle managers are just a few of the many occupations destined for virtual extinction. In the United States alone, as many as 90 million jobs in a labor force of 124 million are potentially vulnerable to displacement by automation.

We are long overdue for public debate over the future of work and how to share the productivity gains of the Information Age. The 1996 election year offers the ideal time to begin talking with each other — both about our deep misgivings and our guarded hopes — as we journey into a new economic era.

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