

## Feb 25, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "On the Road to Rapa Nui"

Tax form 1040 asks retirees to report their Social Security income on line 20a, "Social security benefits." We who draw on these reimbursements paid into the system in the course of our working lives. Indeed, I pay into it even today: whatever net income is derived from my wheat farm gets reported as "Self-Employment Tax" and taxed at roughly 12 percent. SE is a Social-Security tax.

Social Security and attendant Medicare have been derided as "entitlement" in recent months, as if they were hand-outs rather than the quasi-insurance policy into which wage earners contribute in order to be able to draw on them in later years.

Ergo "Fix the Debt," a group supposedly comprised of people from various walks of life—business leaders, policy makers, economists, "voters from across the country"—debating what to do about our out-of-control national debt. Google "Fix the Debt," and the faces of across-the-board Americans spring into view.

Look more closely, and you'll find that seniors and disabled veterans plan to crash a Fix the Debt party to be hosted by Honeywell on February 11. You'll find opposition groups—"Fix the Greed," "Flip the Debt"—that contend, Fix the Debt is a corporate front group for wealthy CEOs whose companies pay zero in federal income tax. The CEOs' aim? To reduce the deficit by cutting Social Security benefits. Here's what you'll learn:

- ✓ Honeywell (like others in [fixthedebt.org/ceo-council](http://fixthedebt.org/ceo-council)) paid no federal income taxes in 2009 or 2010, according to Citizens for Tax Justice.
- ✓ Over the last three years, Honeywell received more than \$2.7 billion in federal defense contracts and reported more than \$2.5 billion in U.S. pre-tax profits. And yet, thanks to corporate deductions, tax subsidies, and loopholes, Honeywell has claimed \$377 million in federal tax refunds during this period.
- ✓ Honeywell CEO David Cote is vice-chair of the Business Roundtable, a club for big business CEOs calling for an extension of all Bush tax cuts, including those for millionaires and billionaires, as well as tax cuts on unearned income from capital gains and dividends. These measures would add \$1.5 trillion to the debt over the next ten years.

This isn't about fixing the debt. It's about rigging the game so big business can still make beaucoup bucks while the 99 percent shoulder the burden of corporate welfare. "Flip the Debt" admonishes corporate business to "Pay Your Damn Taxes." A just-released report from the non-partisan Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) reveals that *Fix the Debt's* lobbying activities have focused mainly on securing billions in new corporate tax breaks.

Senator Bernie Sanders concurs. "In a time when roughly one quarter of the largest corporations in America are paying no federal income taxes, and corporate profits are at an all-time high, it's past time for corporate America to contribute significantly to deficit reduction."

Sometimes it's worth stepping back to take the long view. A few years ago, Canadian historian and essayist Ronald Wright produced a slender volume entitled, "A Short History of Progress." In it, he details civilizations before ours that came to a bad end. The book is something of a condensed version of Jared Diamond's monumental work, but Wright's was published a year prior to "Collapse."

The author draws parallels between the societies that perished and the present, pointing out that, in every case, their beginnings lay in egalitarian, communal groups. As time went on, fiefdoms evolved into pyramid-shaped kingdoms in which the wealthy lived lavishly while everyone else—"the food producers," who generally outnumbered the elite by ten to one—suffered oppression, abject poverty, disease, and misery. Sad to say, all societies become hierarchical, and "the upward concentration of wealth ensures that there is never enough to go around."

Each early civilization cashed all its natural capital. "The forest was cut, the fields worn out, the population too high. And the building boom made matters worse." In the ornate Mayan city of Copan, so much silt washed down the denuded hillsides that "whole houses and streets were buried." Ancient Antioch suffered a similar fate.

The health of land and water—and the woods, which are the keeper of the water—are the only lasting basis for any civilization's survival and success. In spite of 9/11, Wright asserts, "terrorism is a small threat compared with hunger, disease, and climate change."

We are logging everywhere, fishing everywhere, irrigating everywhere, building everywhere—and creating huge wastelands. The Pentagon predicts worldwide famine, anarchy, and warfare "within a generation," should climate change fulfill the worst projections.

On the American continent, "a transfer of the levers of power from elected officials to unelected corporations" has been under way for some time. The idea that the world must be run by the stock market "is as mad as any other fundamentalist illusion, Islamic, Christian, or Marxist."

Rapa Nui's statue cult is particularly instructive for a comparison with our own civilization: Its preoccupation became a "self-destructive mania, an ideological pathology." Its demise shows that wealth is no shield against chaos.

The only reason our present civilization hasn't yet crashed is because we still live off the plundered riches of Inca and Aztec gold and silver, not to mention appropriating "by hostile takeover" the wealth of North America. Like their South American counterparts, North American populations perished by the millions, not so much by the sword of conquistadores as from diseases the Europeans brought with them. The emptying of the continent through deadly diseases (against which Europeans—but not first nations—had developed immunity) caused pioneers to think they had arrived into an untrammelled wilderness. Yet they quickly claimed foodstuffs like wild turkey, maize, beans, pumpkin, squash, and potatoes that "had been developed over thousands of years by New World civilizations." The world we have today is the "gift of the New World."

What's amazing is how recent settled civilization actually is. "No city or monument is much more than 5,000 year old," Wright tells us, "a mere 0.2 percent of the two and a half million years since our first ancestors sharpened a stone."

Are we on the way to Rapa Nui disintegration? President Reagan's secretary of the interior told Congress not to bother with the environment because "I don't know how many future generations we can count on until the Lord returns."

On President's Day 2013, some 40,000 individuals demonstrated near the White House, in the largest U.S. rally ever on climate change and presidential ambivalence. Will it cause corporate America to reverse its profit-driven mania? As a skeptic once said: There may be hope, though not for us.