Politicians in Washington say the economy did well in 1998, citing such facts as these:

** The stock market continues to return phenomenal profits to investors. As 1998 came to a close, the S&P 500 (an average of 500 large firms) had returned an average of 29% per year to investors for the fourth year in a row.[1]

** Executive salaries have never been higher. The NEW YORK TIMES reported recently that Michael Eisner, chairman of the Walt Disney Company, was paid $471.5 million for his work in 1998; Sanford Weill, chairman of Citigroup, received $227.3 million for his year's effort; Eugene Isenberg, chairman of Nabors Industries, received a paycheck of $209.7 million in 1998; Eckhard Peiffer, chairman of Compaq Computer, was paid $192.5 million in 1998; Mark Ruben, chairman of Colgate-Palmolive received $170.6 million; Eli Broad, chairman of Sun America, $149.8 million; Charles Heimbold, chairman of Bristol-Myers Squibb, $146.6 million; General Electric's chairman, John Welch, made do with $138.6 million in 1998. For his efforts (notably unsuccessful) to expand the sale of sugar water worldwide, Summerfield Johnston, Jr., chairman of Coca Cola, received $132.4 million in 1998... so life is good in the executive suites.[2]

For real people doing real work, on the other hand, the situation in 1998 was somewhat different, according to the NEW YORK TIMES:[3]

** Despite strong hiring since 1993 and record-setting low unemployment rates, the number of Americans living in poverty is now just where it was in 1990. People have jobs, but many of those jobs pay poverty wages.

### "As the Federal budget deficit has turned into a surplus, private indebtedness, particularly for consumers, has risen to record levels, giving the economy the sort of boost that Government deficits did in the 1980's.

"But that debt accumulation has come at a cost," says the TIMES. "By one estimate, 5 percent of all the nation's households have filed for bankruptcy protection [during] the last five years."

** In 1990, 16.1% of the non-elderly lacked health insurance coverage. Today the figure has risen to 18.3% — a 14% increase in the medically uninsured in the past 8 years.

** After adjusting for inflation, the median family income (half earn more, half earn less) was $37,005 in 1997, just about where it was in 1989, and only $1260 higher than it was in 1973. In other words, purchasing power grew 0.14% per year, 1973-1997. The NEW YORK TIMES says, "Many households in the 1960's added more to their incomes in a single year than their counterparts today have added in 25 years. And they did it with one wage earner, not two or three, working fewer hours than the average jobholder does today. Such changes hurt. Even in good times, the long working hours strain family life."

Even conservative, market-oriented economists are now saying that the performance of the '90s economy demonstrates that government action is needed to alleviate poverty and inequality.

Robert Lucas, the Nobel prize winning economist at the University of Chicago, told the TIMES, "We are living through a period of sustained economic growth without inflation, and the unemployment rate has come down to levels I never thought I would see again in the United States. But there are obviously plenty of problems. Poverty and income inequality are two. These are problems that cannot be addressed by the markets. They have to be addressed by specific government programs offering specific solutions," Lucas said.

Unfortunately the so-called "conservatives" (of both parties) who control this Congress have their minds elsewhere.

===

"A VAST DELUSION OF DENIAL"

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) announced in March[4] that the incidence of cancer (all types combined) decreased during the period 1990-1997 at an annual rate of 0.7%. The cancer death rate (all types combined) also declined during the period, NCI said. This was the first multi-year decline in cancer rates ever reported.

The NCI's upbeat report said incidence rates declined for both males and females and for most ethnic groups. Two exceptions to the trend were black males and Asian and Pacific Islander females; in these two groups, the incidence of cancers (of all types) continued to increase.

Unfortunately all this good news was thrown into question by a study published in the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION in October, showing that more than 40% of cancers are never diagnosed among people who die in hospitals. Thus, many cancers are never counted in the nation's cancer statistics.[5]

The study, of 1105 autopsies (654 men and 451 women) over a 10-year period, found 250 malignant cancers in the 1105 cadavers but 103 of the 250 cancers (41%) had not been diagnosed prior to autopsy. Furthermore, of the 103 undiagnosed cancers, 57 (or 55%) were the immediate cause of death, so cancer incidence and cancer deaths are both seriously under-reported. The average age of the 1105 cadavers was 48.3 years; the average age of the people who died with an undiagnosed malignancy was 54.3 years.

This study examined autopsies completed during the period 1986-1996 at the Medical Center at New Orleans, a major teaching hospital for medical students at Tulane and Louisiana State universities.

Importantly, the study pointed out that autopsy rates have declined, nationwide, from an average of 50% in the mid-1960s to about 10% today in teaching hospitals and 5% in community hospitals. The "autopsy rate" means the percentage of people dying in a hospital who are autopsied.

If we accept that the average autopsy rate in the U.S. is now somewhere between 10% and 5% (say, 7.5%), then we can calculate that the autopsy rate has declined at an annual rate of 5.2 percent per year for the past 35 years.[5] Since autopsies are needed to discover 40% of the cancers in those who die in hospitals, it seems entirely possible that the decline in the autopsy rate completely explains the recently-reported declines in both cancer incidence and cancer deaths in the U.S. Indeed, one might legitimately ask whether U.S. cancer rates are, in actual fact, continuing to climb steadily, with the trends hidden by misdiagnosis and the absence of autopsies.

Commenting on the Louisiana study, the editor of the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, George D. Lundberg, says, "The autopsy rates for hospital deaths at nonteaching hospitals nationally now average below 9%; many hospitals have autopsy rates at or near 0% despite many deaths."[6] Dr. Lundberg points out that in 1965 Chicago-area hospitals ("a reasonable sample for urban areas") autopsied 50% of those who...
died. Now they autopsy about 10%.

Why has the autopsy rate declined? The autopsy has fallen by the wayside, Dr. Lundberg says, because it provides an uncomfortable truth about disease -- a truth that contradicts the medical community’s wishful thinking about the ability of high-tech medicine to diagnose illness accurately.

"The autopsy is not dead, but it slumbers deeply, apparently the victim of a vast cultural delusion of denial," Dr. Lundberg says. "It is not exactly a conspiracy of silence or necessarily a massive intentional cover-up, but it is a movement with millions of players, all in complicity for widely varying reasons with the final result of 'do not bother me with the truth' on the sickest patients--the ones who die."

Dr. Lundberg recommends that the government require at least a 30% autopsy rate for any hospital wishing to participate in the Medicare program, and that the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations require at least a 25% autopsy rate as a condition of hospital accreditation. He says these measures are needed to return to a "hospital culture that values medical truth rather than values hiding it."

GOING AFTER A CORPORATE CHARTER

In September, a coalition of 30 citizens' groups petitioned the Attorney General of California to begin proceedings to revoke the charter of the Unocal Corporation (Union Oil Company of California).[7]

The 127-page petition charged that Unocal has consistently broken the law, devastated the environment in California and around the world, committed hundreds of violations of occupational safety and health regulations, violated human rights in Afghanistan and Burma, and "usurped political power."

California's attorney general, Dan Lundgren, a so-called "conservative," took less than a week to reject the petition in a 3-sentence letter: "we decline to institute legal proceedings at this time," he said without offering any reasons.

The petitioners say they were not surprised and they will continue to try to revoke the charters of recidivist corporations.

To keep abreast of activism about corporations, join the E-mail list corp-focus. Send E-mail to listproc@essential.org containing the following information on a single line: subscribe corp-focus <your name> (no period).

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


Descriptor terms: economy; wages; poverty; inequality; executive pay; cancer; cancer underreporting; statistics; george lundberg; corporations; unocal;