

# The Jobs Americans Won't Do

by John F. Rohe

Mexican President Vicente Fox has been scolded for declaring that Mexicans do jobs that “even blacks won’t do.” Curiously, nary a whimper is heard when President Bush insults all citizens by referring to “Jobs Americans Won’t Do.”

Before the Civil War, John C. Calhoun’s views on the equality of human beings were nurtured with a mint julep on the veranda of a southern plantation. This leading North Carolina senator, and presidential hopeful, had a splendid panoramic view of the jobs that Americans wouldn’t do. In spirited debates, Senator Calhoun became a voice for the South in perpetuating the institution of slavery.

By 1860, however, Hinton Helper’s best-selling book, *The Impending Crisis*, demonstrated that slavery benefitted neither whites nor blacks. By spurning jobs that Americans won’t do, Southern whites became detrimentally dependent upon others. In the South, Hinton Helper observed: “We want Bibles, brooms, buckets and books, and we go to the North; ... we want toys, primers, school books, fashionable apparel, machinery, medicines, tombstones, and a thousand other things, and we go to the North for them all.”

When cotton was king, the South believed it could comfortably rise above the “jobs Americans won’t do.” The pretentious image was supported by an illusion. Hinton Helper’s book sold well in the North, but pervasive illiteracy among blacks and working class whites stifled book sales in slave trading states.

The slogan, “Jobs Americans won’t do,” has now emerged as the presidential mantra for importing more foreign labor. The leader of the free world offers an assurance that Americans have graduated to a better

life. There is a curious appeal to self-referential pride in the slogan, but it comes with all the trappings of Calhoun’s mint-juleped view from the veranda.

Who, actually, is unwilling to do “the jobs Americans won’t do”? Has picking up after ourselves fallen beneath our dignity? Has caring for others lost appeal? Are we no longer interested in cooking? Are our sons and daughters no longer willing to work their way through college? How do these jobs get done in areas with low-immigrant populations? Harry Truman once professed that no one should have to wash anyone else’s socks and underwear. Truman washed his own.

Who is claiming that we won’t do these jobs? Do they have contempt for calloused hands? Is the unemployed American refusing to do these jobs? Or is this appeal to our sense of dignity and pride actually a disguised corporate quest for cheap labor?

The illiterate slave driver’s disdainful view of inferior beings became a sad disillusion. Yet, this view is inherent in the President’s proclamation that the “jobs Americans won’t do” will be offered to the lowest bidder in a global job fair.

What is the President’s mental image of “jobs Americans won’t do?” He’s not claiming the jobs are unnecessary. Rather, he is pointing out that we need not perform them. Then who will? People looking different than us? Has the President been sipping mint juleps with Sen. Calhoun?

What are the jobs that Americans won’t do? Doing laundry? Making beds? Milking cows? Picking up the garbage? If this is a job that only immigrants will do, then Los Angeles should be spotless, and trash should be gathering on the streets in low-immigrant northern communities.

In fact, Americans do these jobs. Americans do these jobs with pride. Americans have thrived on these jobs over the centuries. The Americans doing these jobs don’t look any different. They wear the face of

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America. They do not shrink from work. Americans just resist enslaved wages and indecent working conditions. The soul of America is still found in our commitment to a work ethic. A presidential slogan to the contrary offends the soul of America.

If we hope to restore dignity to labor, then we need to honor it with a living wage. Flooding the job market with cheap labor forces a debate over the minimum wage. Congress has not repealed the law of

supply and demand.

The “jobs Americans won’t do” adage seems innocuous on its face, but it carries a hefty price tag. Wordsworth reminds us that by “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” By laying waste our powers, we become the enslaved, much like the disillusioned illiterate white Southerner of 1850.

The President’s slogan is an invitation to join him on Sen. Calhoun’s veranda. Mint julep anyone? ■