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Healthcare? One desperate man finds it in jail

By Leonard Pitts Jr.

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I pay my taxes.

I will not offend your intelligence by pretending to enjoy it; writing that check is about as enjoyable as a chainsaw root canal. But I don't resent it, either.

I pay my taxes because this is how we the people pay for things we deem to be in our communal interest. This is how our military is sustained. This is how our children are educated. This is how our potholes are filled. This is how our libraries are stocked. This is how our police officers are supplied. This is how we take care of us. So I pay my taxes.

It is because I do, that I was appalled by the story of James Verone. He is a 59-year-old man from Gastonia, N.C. Drove a Coca-Cola delivery truck for 17 years until he lost his job three years ago. He got another job driving a truck, but that job went away, too. So Verone took part-time work at a convenience store, only to find himself physically unable to do it. Verone has a bad back, a problem with his left foot that causes him to limp, arthritis that swells his knuckles and carpal tunnel syndrome. He could not stand behind the register, bend to reach the low shelves, lift things to the high ones

And he had no medical insurance. Then, to make matters worse, he found a lump on his chest. Desperate, Verone considered his options. He filed for disability and early Social Security, but did not qualify. Meanwhile, his savings were running out like sand through an hour glass. He considered a homeless shelter. He considered asking for charity. "The pain was beyond the tolerance that I could accept," he told a reporter from the Gaston Gazette, upon whose story this account is based. "I kind of hit a brick wall with everything."

That's when Verone turned to crime. On the 9th of this month, he walked into a randomly-chosen bank and passed a teller a note demanding one dollar and medical attention. He never showed a weapon, stood there while she called police, waited on a couch in the lobby for them to arrive, surrendered quietly. He went to jail, where he now has shelter, food and, yes, medical care.

I am not here to lionize Verone. His stunt could have gotten someone hurt. Indeed, the teller was taken to the hospital because her blood pressure spiked.

No, I don't lionize him. But I do empathize.

I pay my taxes. I consider it a patriotic obligation — a sacrifice for the greater we.

But that is not how it is seen by the anti-government forces who have dominated political debate in recent years. To hear them tell it, to pay taxes is to be robbed. And every federal program our taxes support is wasteful and unnecessary, except, of course, those that directly benefit the complainer himself.

During the healthcare debate, we kept hearing that a government-run system amounted to "socialized medicine," as if Marx would be your triage nurse and Lenin your doctor. As if, by that definition, our government-run libraries, police forces, schools and garbage pickup were not also "socialized." As if it's Aetna that really has your interests at heart.

If healthcare were "socialized," a law-abiding working man would not have felt driven to this extreme. A great nation has a moral obligation to provide a safety net, to care for the most broken and vulnerable of its people.

I pay my taxes. That's one reason I do.

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