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I create no jobs, so far

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Of the many failings I regret, my lack of flag-waving patriotism ranks high on the list. So I decided to change.

President Obama says that true economic patriots should invest our dwindling memories of cash in American jobs. I agree. I have taken two giant steps toward rehabilitating myself.

First, I now buy no American-flag lapel pin made in China, except those made by a U.S. corporation, headquartered in Delaware with an off-shore shell to hide income from the IRS.

Second, I am prepared to spend, spend, spend.

But starting a new business to create jobs turns out to be harder than just spending money I don't have.

With the cuts in defense budgets and the winding down of our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, I figured the most viable growth business in America's future was peace.

I worked up a business plan and named my venture, Peace and Prosperity, Unlimited Unliability Company.

I intended to buy all the swords and shields the U.S. military no longer uses and hire 10 brawny Blue Grassians to beat them into plowshares and pruning hooks.

I would equip each employee with a three-pound sledge hammer that is made in America by businesspersons so small that they regularly dance with each other on the head of a pin.

Low productivity is the key to job growth in the private sector, and you can't get lower than one Blue Grassian wielding one hammer.

Since my patriotism exceeded my cash, I hitchhiked to New York to solicit help from the Rotten Apple Venture Capital Fund, which "only helps first-time entrepreneurs," according to its website, www.LoseMoneyNow.com.

I found the Fund's office on Wall Street, three flights down in an abandoned boiler room. The scent of fermenting fruit drew me directly to Mr. Hy Eenah, Rotten Apple's CEO, CFO, COO, CIO and CCABW. Hy boasted that he was "a self-made man," an idea that continues to intrigue me.

As Hy demonstrated his secret technique for pulling himself down in life by his own bootstraps, I summarized my plan. Hy frowned.

"We are distress investors," he explained. "Our mission is to find the one rotten apple in every barrel of new ventures before anyone else. We'll nurture its disintegration, and then look for opportunities when the promising ones start to reek by association. We are proactive. We make our own good fortune."

"Maybe I'm in the wrong place," I said. "You want me to fail; I want me to succeed."

"Tut-tut," Hy tut-tutted. "Rotten Apple wants you to succeed in ways you've never imagined. But we want to short your success so that the downside is our upside. See? Sometimes it's harder to explain our strategy than do it. Well, son, let's talk brass tacks. Who in the Sam Hill is going to buy plowshares and pruning hooks in this day and age?"

"Make it and they will buy," I said, quoting confidently from my one-sentence business plan.

Hy sighed. "My boy, American farmers are not going to buy plowshares and pruning hooks unless they're attached to a 100-horse engine with an air-conditioned cab."

This cold truth hit me like a cold bar of soap in a cold shower on a cold day in a cold January.

"But...", Hy said, "maybe...we can still find the lemon in this lemonade. What say you to peddling them to Martha Stewart? That dame'll pitch anything that was once useful and now isn't. Like rusted-solid weathervanes that can't turn. She'll be hanging your trinkets on living-room walls in every gated community in America."

"No," I said. "I want to produce something useful, that has purpose and meaning, that my employees will take pride in."

"Well, you can always sell your plowshares and pruning hooks back to Uncle Sam," Hy said.

"Huh?"

"My boy, my boy. You're thinking too small to fail really B-I-G. Sell them to Obama and let Hillary hand them out to Third World farmers who are still condemned to using that junk. Call it, Plows for the Poor. www.PruneThePeople.com. Let Afghanistan's opium poppy crop runneth over. We'll turn the desert into a land of milk and magnesia. We'll make sure that oppressed peasants will be with us forever. Bless their hearts."

"I don't want to do that," I said, "and even if I did, Congressional Republicans won't fund another foreign-aid program...for foreigners."

"No, but they might fund Bootstraps for Blue Grass," Hy mused. "We'll get job-retraining money to show your brawny lads and lasses how to hit a sword with a hammer. That should take a year or two. But we'll write off the 10 hammers as a Section 179 capital investment in 2011. Then we'll get a new-hire subsidy and a free building."

"Forget it," I said. "That frolic's over."

"Mmmm. Maybe you're right. My boy, we're looking at this venture backwards."

"I agree."

"Indeed, we are," Hy said. "We need to concentrate on the supply side, not the demand. Rotten Apple makes its money by producing nothing of value. Anyone can make money by selling nothing of value."

"They can?"

"The trick to making money when manufacturing nothing of value is to do it cheap. Undercut the competition on price. Your plows and pruning hooks are dopey enough to fly in the upscale catalog trade, but they cost too much. I can't ruin this barrel unless I get your costs under control."

"What costs?"

"You're planning to pay your employees in Blue Grass, say, \$8 an hour. Right?"

"I was thinking a minimum of \$16."

"That's not thinking, son. Here's what we'll do. I will set you up with 10 nice Vietnamese ladies who will beat your American swords into plowshares for \$2.50 a day and no benefits. That will let you price your products in Blue Grass at least 90 percent below what it costs you to make them in Blue Grass."

"But...but the President wants patriots like me to create manufacturing jobs here, not there."

"OK," Hy said. "How about if the HoChiMinnies beat your swords into plowshares, and then we ship 'em back to Blue Grass where your brawny lads and lasses beat them back into swords? Then you sell them to the Pentagon to use against the peasants we've armed with pruning hooks."

"Is that legal?"

"It's recycled military procurement," Hy said. "Everybody wins. The Democrats like recycling; the Republicans like swords. And...it creates jobs in Blue Grass. Of course, if you made the swords without handles, they'd be even cheaper."

"NO!" I shouted.

"All right. How about papier-mâché blades?"

"NEVER!"

"You are a prisoner of the old normal," Hy sighed.

"I want to make something useful in Blue Grass. I don't want to scam the government. I don't want to succeed by ruining things. I want to pay a living wage."

"Suit yourself," Hy said, "but self-indulgence rarely nets out."

I trudged home, too discouraged to even stick out my thumb.

And then it came to me. My employees would not make plowshares or shields. They'd make stock-market predictions.

Three workers would predict things will improve; three would predict things will get worse; and three would predict things will stay the same.

And one would always say, "More research money is needed."

There's a name for this business. It's on the tip of my tongue.

I've renamed my new venture, Adam's Apple, UUC.

Our brawny lads and lasses stand ready to hammer out predictions on a moment's notice. They've been standing ready for weeks. Sometimes, I admit, they've had to sit ready.

Economic patriotism used to be easier, that's for sure.

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