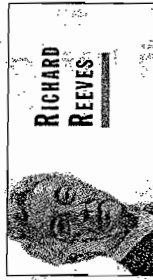


A nation of servants — and wrapping rooms

DALLAS — The newest thing in the "Park" cities, Vice President Cheney's old neighborhood, is "wrapping rooms." Friends tell me that some people are glassing-in small porches or even building small additions to big homes for permanent space filled with work tables, rolls of wrapping paper, cutters, ribbons and all that.

It seems that social seasons never end anymore among the rich. Folks in plush enclaves of Dallas, particularly Highland Park (that's where the Cheneys lived in his old days) and the better parts of University Park, are well beyond killer kitchens and Roman baths. Now entertainment, gifts and one-upmanship are an everyday thing, and strivers judge each other not by clothes alone, or personal trainers, or wine cellars, but by



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how they wrap little things from Neiman Marcus or Saks.

They seem to be beyond New York, too. At least I have never heard of wrapping rooms in Manhattan or Scarsdale, though it is very possible I am living in the wrong part of town. During Christmas party season, my teenage daughter answered an RSVP-seeking call from someone who asked, "Are you the social secretary?" That, I think, is as far as things have gone in the East. People have full-or, part-time, secretaries who handle invitations, food,

flowers and all that.

This is no small thing. The rich are doing their duty in this era of trickle-down economics. In the days leading up to Christmas, the news — print and electronic — was full of patriotic messages chiding us all, rich and poor alike, to spend all we could earn or borrow from Visa or Mastercard (at Mafia rates of 20-percent-and-more interest). An outfit called ShopperTrak, using Department of Commerce and point-of-sales statistics, was widely cited, reminding us that we were not spending enough. The country might go into recession if we continued to hold onto our dollars.

Suddenly, it seems, the American economy is not about production, ingenuity and trade. Consumption above all is our

new charge. Remember the good old days when they used to yell at us that we weren't saving enough — and the Japanese were — to give American industry and banks and such enough money to invest in research and the future? Our betters were concerned that we would be reduced to a nation flipping hamburgers for each other.

Now all we have to do is spend — and then everything will be OK. Easy.

Investment now, at least in the reign of Bush, is about cutting taxes on the rich, who will, presumably, then hire us as wrappers, trainers, secretaries, drivers, nannies and dog-walkers and -walkers. The money to pay us — which we must spend immediately — will come from eliminating or cutting the

taxes on high incomes, investments, dividends, and the estates of what the president's father, former president George H.W. Bush, liked to call the "investing classes."

The rest of us can be a nation of servants. Actually, in this new age, we will be less than servants. The code of old-time servitude meant that the more marginal classes were sort of adopted by the rich, provided with some security in terms of medical care and old age. That has changed. You're on your own, buddy! The new servers are, more often than not, independent contractors — "independent contractors" is usually a euphemism for "no benefits" — who are, more often than not, paid in cash. Many in the investing classes hate government interference in

the workplace, but demand government responsibility for the health and maintenance of the serving class.

So, the way it works is this: Lower taxes on the rich free up the money to hire the poor to run their errands and tone their bodies, and the marginal classes have second and third serving-job opportunities. And if the serving classes spend, and spend and borrow and borrow — which, of course, is exactly what the new Bush administration is doing — the whole thing looks pretty good for a while. A while, however, ends when the new servants become old-folks with health problems and personal debts they can't pay.

A happy and prosperous New Year to one and all!

Universal Press Syndicate

12-31-02
LCSA World