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Take this book and read it: The Dorgan manifesto

It was with some anxiety that I opened my copy of "Take This Job and Ship It: How Corporate Greed and Brain-Dead Politics Are Selling Out America," Sen. Byron Dorgan's just published populist manifesto. I was worried that, like most books of this genre, it would be a fluffy pastiche of excerpts from Senate floor speeches and op-ed articles, anecdotal rather than analytical.

My fears were groundless. "Take This Job and Ship It" is a serious and important book, written by someone who knows as much about the practical workings of the international economy, and the way American legislation and politics shape that economy, as anyone alive. There is nothing slapdash or egotistical about this book.

Dorgan believes we are engaged in "a contest for the soul of a great nation, with immense ramifications for the entire world." He wrote the book to explain (sometimes at the top of his lungs) how our trade policies benefit a small number of extremely rich and powerful people, the people who least need help from government, at the expense of average Americans, who are told - falsely - that they are the beneficiaries of globalization of the economy.

Dorgan has taken a considerable risk in publishing his views. Pro-business ideologues will find plenty in this book to rouse them to indignation. Recent history indicates that Dakota Democrats thrive best in silence. When they speak up, take the lead, and become visible as progressives, they sometimes suffer from the McGovern-Daschle effect. They get retired to Avon or Regent.

North Dakotans have always liked and respected Byron Dorgan. After reading this book, they should have a greatly deepened appreciation for his courage, intelligence and leadership.

You cannot read the book without feeling delight in this resurgence of North Dakota's populist heritage. Even those who disagree with Dorgan's point of view should be glad we have a senator who seeks to create a national dialogue about an issue so essential to American life.

Dorgan calls the book "a defense of the American worker and a plan to create public policy in this country that values work and helps the people who get up every morning and build, create, innovate, and yes, manufacture, fabricate, and push wheelbarrows as well."

It is more than that. It is a severe indictment of corporate greed, which Dorgan

regards as erosive of essential American values. Dorgan admits that both political parties are responsible for the national crisis, but he argues - and who really can disagree - that the Republican Party delights in being the handmaiden of the corporate agenda in its least appealing form.

The basic argument of the book is clearly articulated on page 16:

"The influence that many of these corporations have over our government is enormous - and that may be the largest understatement of this book.

"Big business develops, with the support of our government, a set of trade policies that create opportunities for them to hire foreign workers to do what American workers used to do.

"Uncle Sam is selling out the American worker and, in the process, allowing these corporations to pole-vault over standards such as safe workplaces, minimum wages, labor unions, child-labor laws, and environmental protection."

Dorgan praises corporate CEOs with a truly human touch, but he understands that capitalism is a morally neutral engine for making profits along the path of least resistance. In other words, though he is disappointed that American companies have taken their manufacturing plants offshore to take advantage of lower labor costs and weaker environmental and worker protection regimes, he understands why they do so.

What he does not accept is that the U.S. government should provide incentives for such behavior. He does not accept that globalization is an unassailable paradigm or a *fait accompli* that will magically lift everyone to a higher prosperity. (He proves that NAFTA failed to provide the benefits that its proponents, including Bill Clinton, promised.)

He cannot understand why the government does not insist upon a level playing field in international trade. He cannot understand why America does not use its immense power to lift the rest of the world to enlightened labor and environmental standards, instead of gutting our middle class and selling off our national assets in the name of "competitiveness."

And he particularly cannot accept that our national political leaders lie to the American public about the effect of their executive decisions and legislative actions.

In the manner of the great economic progressives, from Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt to North Dakota's Gerald P. Nye and William L. Langer, Dorgan argues that the only sensible counterweight to corporate greed is a national government willing to insist upon human, family, and community values that cannot be measured on an Excel chart. "The gains we made in the United States that have made our country great have, in large part, been made over the opposition of major corporations. On nearly every issue, from fair labor standards, to the minimum wage, to environmental standards, to standards for a safe workplace, corporations have fought against them every step of the way."

Dorgan explains in simple and yet intelligent terms why Wal-Mart is a mistake for any community. He admits that Wal-Mart is an easy target, but it is also an essential one.

As I read his Wal-Mart chapter (132-150), I had two visceral reactions. I actually grieved for my hometown Dickinson, which is just the sort of community made less healthy, less prosperous and less interesting in every way by the coming of Wal-Mart. The stuff is cheap, Dorgan admits, because 70 percent of it is made in China under conditions that would never be permitted in the United States, but the price of the stuff is low-paying jobs, few or no benefits, a downward pressure on wages in the rest of the community, and greatly increased burdens on the social welfare system. The community sags and everyone becomes more consumer-homogenous - all for a 20-cent saving on a package of diapers, manufactured under conditions that the American labor movement of the 19th and 20th century struggled heroically to overcome.

"Take This Job and Ship It" is not a calm and tolerant book. "I intend to expose the culprits," Dorgan declares, and he does. There is some anger in the book. Towards the end, Dorgan writes, "I know I've painted a pretty grim picture in this book of corporate greed, political incompetence, and a chorus of ignorance that has undermined America's ability to make progress. I haven't pulled punches. That is the way I see it, and it isn't pretty." (p. 234)

I do not wish to be an uncritical cheerleader for "Take This Job and Ship It." The book is at times too folksy for the seriousness of its subject matter. Now and then, it's a little hokey and a little loud.

Given the economic system of North Dakota, I would have liked Dorgan to provide a sustained analysis of the American farm program, and a longer discussion of the national security implications of our food supply.

Perhaps more important, I think the book would have benefited from some concessions to the positive implications of globalization. Surely the transformation of the global economy is a mixed bag. Demonization of the enemy does not exactly invite dialogue. But these are relatively minor concerns.

Dorgan concludes the book with a set of 11 suggestions that seem to me absolutely unassailable.

1. He calls for a thoughtful long-term "American Fair Trade Plan."
2. He suggests that the 17 federal agencies that deal with trade be consolidated into one Federal Trade Department.
3. He suggests an assessment of "the national security implications of trade."
4. He calls for fungible "Import Certificates" (an idea he attributes to Warren Buffett) to force down the trade deficit.
5. He demands a repeal of tax breaks for exporting American jobs offshore.
6. He would prohibit corporations from importing goods manufactured in factories (or countries) that "abuse overseas workers."
7. He would set a ceiling on trade deficits, just as we have a ceiling on the national debt that can be raised only by an explicit act of Congress.
8. He would require the U.S. government to reassess its trade relationship with China every year.

9. He argues that we should encourage a stronger labor movement in America.

10. He insists that we must reform our education and health care systems if we truly wish to be competitive in the world markets.

11. And he would outlaw the "outsourcing" of pollution beyond American boundaries.

All this seems perfectly reasonable - and not at all radical, except to those who cannot stomach the idea of restraining the orgy of early 21st century capitalism. One could quibble here or quibble there, but on the whole, it seems clear that we'd be better off if the Dorgan reforms were adopted. That's where "we the people" come in. Dorgan is quite sure such reforms will only occur when the people demand them and punish the slaves of the status quo.

Dorgan argues that the only reason that these reforms are not passed into law is that the overwhelming majority of the members of the U.S. Congress (some cravenly, some naively) do the bidding of what used to be called the "plutocrats." Our "representatives" pretend to represent us, but in fact they represent the giant corporations and the CEO class who funnel millions of dollars into their campaign chests.

I hope "Take This Job and Ship It" gets plenty of national airtime and that North Dakotans read the book and discuss it around the water cooler and the combine.

(Tribune columnist Clay Jenkinson is hiking somewhere on the Little Missouri River. He filed this column before he embarked on July 31. Jenkinson is the Theodore Roosevelt scholar-in-residence at Dickinson State University. He lives in Bismarck. E-mail Jenkinson at Jeffysage@aol.com.)