OP-ED COLUMNIST

There's a Catch: Jobs

By BOB HERBERT

The president tells us the economy is accelerating, and the statistics seem to bear him out. But don't hold your breath waiting for your standard of living to improve. Bush country is not a good environment for working families.

In the real world, which is the world of families trying to pay their mortgages and get their children off to college, the economy remains troubled. While the analysts and commentators of the comfortable class are assuring us that the president's tax cuts and the billions being spent on Iraq have been good for the gross domestic product, the workaday folks are locked in a less sanguine reality.

It's a reality in which:

• The number of Americans living in poverty has increased by three million in the past two years.

• The median household income has fallen for the past two years.

• The number of dual-income families, particularly those with children under 18, has declined sharply.

The administration can spin its "recovery" any way it wants. But working families can't pay their bills with data about the gross domestic product. They need the income from steady employment. And when it comes to employment, the Bush administration has compiled the worst record since the Great Depression.

The jobs picture is far more harrowing than it is usually presented by the media. Despite modest wage increases for those who are working, the unemployment rate is 6.1 percent, which represents almost nine million people. Millions more have become discouraged and left the labor market. And there are millions of men and women who are employed but working significantly fewer hours than they'd like.

Jared Bernstein, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, has taken a look at the hours being worked by families, rather than individuals. It's a calculation that gets to the heart of a family's standard of living.

The declines he found were "of a magnitude that's historically been commensurate with double-digit unemployment rates," he said. It was not just that there were fewer family members working. The ones who were employed were working fewer hours.

According to government statistics, there are nearly 4.5 million people working part-time because they have been unable to find full-time work. In many cases, as the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas noted in a recent report, the part-time worker is "earning far less money than his or her background and experience warrant —
Economists expect some modest job creation to occur over the next several months. But there's a "just in time for the election" quality to the current economic surge, and even Republicans are worried that the momentum may not last. The president has played his tax-cut card. The spending on Iraq, most Americans fervently hope, will not go on indefinitely. And President Bush's own Treasury secretary is talking about an inevitable return to higher interest rates.

Where's the jobs creation miracle in this dismal mix?

Meanwhile, these are some of the things working (and jobless) Americans continue to face:

• Sharply increasing local taxes, including property taxes.

• Steep annual increases in health care costs.

• Soaring tuition costs at public and private universities.

Families are living very close to the edge economically. And this situation is compounded, made even more precarious, by the mountains of debt American families are carrying — mortgages, overloaded credit cards, college loans, etc.

The Bush administration has made absolutely no secret of the fact that it is committed to the interests of the very wealthy. Leona Helmsley is supposed to have said that "only the little people pay taxes." The Bush crowd has turned that into a national fiat.

A cornerstone of post-Depression policy in this country has been a commitment to policies aimed at raising the standard of living of the poor and the middle class. That's over.

When it comes to jobs, taxes, education and middle-class entitlement programs like Social Security, the message from the Bush administration couldn't be clearer: You're on your own.