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'AMERICAN DREAM HAS TURNED INTO A NIGHTMARE'

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Michael Patterson did everything right.

He got A's in high school, proudly served his country in Vietnam, took his family responsibilities seriously, bought a house, paid the bills, helped with Little League, sent his widowed mother monthly checks to help pay the rent.

"I always believed in the American dream," the 46-year-old shipwright, or naval carpenter, said Monday during a lunch break at an entrance to the Long Beach Naval Shipyard where he has worked for the past 22 years.

"That American dream has turned into a nightmare. I've worked hard. I've done everything I was supposed to do. Is this my reward? I'm too young to retire. I'm too old to start over."

Patterson is one of about 4,100 shipyard workers who learned Saturday that his job, once again, is threatened. But this time is different.

Although talk of a possible closure and the potential loss of thousands of jobs has gone on for years, the government facility pitched more ominously toward sinking over the weekend with a recommendation from the Pentagon that scores of major installations be shut down.

Defense Secretary Les Aspin is expected to submit his list of military facilities on the hit list to the independent Base Closure and Realignment Commission by Monday. Final decisions on which installations will be consolidated, reduced or even closed aren't expected until after Sept. 1.

In the meantime, workers by the thousands wait. Their families wait. The tension mounts.

"It's more than just a paycheck," Patterson's wife, Louise, said. "Michael's whole life is there at the shipyard.

"He's upset," she adds. "He's moody. He's not himself. He's (feeling) very low."

Added his mother, Antoinette Patterson, from her home in Milwaukee: "My two boys support me. My other son is in the auto industry. He's about ready to get laid off, too.

"I'm worried. I hope someone can turn this around."

Despite efforts to rally community support to save the sinking shipyard, Patterson said he and co-workers feel despair about the future. "Until Saturday, I was in shock and denial. I wanted to think the shipyard would not be on the list.

"Now that it looks like it will be, it's been like a death in the family. A death in the immediate family. It's like a dark cloud has passed over our house and over our future.

"On Saturday, the family took a walk in the park to escape. I was devastated. I enjoy my work. I always wanted to do something for my country. I listened to John Kennedy when he said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.'

"Now I feel betrayed. We are a viable, profitable shipyard. We've done everything the government ever asked. I feel like I have no control over my destiny."

Patterson is quick to point out that he and his wife, who is an administrative assistant for an insurance company, are far better off financially than many of his co-workers who are single parents.

But that doesn't mean they wouldn't be financially devastated if he lost his \$30,000-a-year job at the shipyard.

For the past 10 years, the Pattersons' son, who is now 15, has attended private schools. That's the first expense that has to go, Patterson said. Next, any thought of upgrading their cars, an '84 Buick Regal in acute need of repair and an '86 Chevy Chevette.

"The uncertainty is very, very difficult," Louise Patterson said. "I'm worried about my son. I'm worried about Michael's mother. I'm worried we'll lose our house."

"No one at the shipyard is saying, 'How am I going to make my Mercedes payment?'" Michael Patterson added. "We're thinking about food and shelter and wondering if we'll be picking up cans on Skid Row in five years."

The Pattersons live in South-Central Los Angeles. They elected to stay in the troubled community because they want to be positive role models. "The economy there is devastated," Patterson said. "We could have left. But we stayed. I wanted to show that everyone in South-Central isn't on welfare. I've tried to keep my son away from gangs, work hard and do the right thing.

"Now I could lose my job. It scares me. The president talks about retraining. Retraining for what? There are no jobs in California."

Rick Cassell, a 42-year-old security specialist who's worked at the shipyard for 12 years, also expressed his disillusionment with the economy in the Golden State. "Everyone looks forward to retirement," he said "Now it looks like there isn't going to be any retirement for anyone.

"I'm still a red-blooded American. I'll fight for my country. But the people who work here have put their blood and sweat into the shipyard. If it closes, the West Coast is going to pay the price.

"I want out of California."

Cassell and Patterson and others whose jobs are threatened say they never really thought they'd wind up unemployed like thousands of others they've read about in recent years.

"We're not statistics," Patterson declared. "We are human beings."