

Earth Manifesto



Uncommon Sense and Fair-Mindedness

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Democracy originated in ancient Greece. This was a great idea of fair representation in politics and governance that first flowered forth into history in this beautiful peninsula and island nation more than 2,500 years ago. The citizens of Greece passionately loved freedom, and respected reason and clarity of thought, so they cherished knowledge, balanced perspective, and the concept of all things in moderation. At the time, mariners in Greece "sailed on a sapphire sea washing enchanted islands purple in a luminous air", as Edith Hamilton eloquently observed in *The Greek Way*. Evocative music being played on a harp-like lyre heralds the arrival of these introductory words. (To listen to some of this meditative strumming sound, and be rewarded by watching a beautiful slide show tour of ancient Greece, see YouTube, *Ancient Greek Music - The Lyre of Classical Antiquity*.)

The people in ancient Greece appreciated knowledge for its value for living -- and not merely for its own sake. Knowledge was seen to be capable of leading people "away from error to right action." The Greeks "loved beauty with economy", as the statesman Pericles put it, and they embraced a kind of economy that was the opposite of mindlessly wasteful consumerism or hubris-filled materialistic grandiosity. To them, their gods were nearby "to watch over deeds of justice and kindness", according to the poet Hesiod.

Throughout most of ancient history before the flowering of rationality and fair-mindedness in Greece, "nobles" and assorted despots or plutocrats ruled nations, and people were subjugated to the primacy of kings or dictators or a powerful oligarchic few. (Not so good.) One tremendous conflict in history was to decide whether freedom or tyranny is the stronger force: the wars between the Persian Empire and the Greeks.

Darius the Great was the ruler of the First Persian Empire at the peak of its power in the 5th century BCE. From his native Persia, Darius had conquered most of what is modern day India, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans and Egypt, so he presided over the most extensive empire the world had seen until that time. Then he marched on Greece, "a rocky land and poor", intent on subjugating the defiant Greeks. A legendary battle took place on the small seaside plain of Marathon in 490 BCE, and the freedom-loving Athenians miraculously defeated the powerful tyrant and his huge army and navy. This event is often seen as a pivotal moment in early European history.

Ten years passed, and the curtain rose again for the next episode in this epic drama. Darius had died, and his son Xerxes brought another large army down the Meander River valley in Turkey to the Aegean Sea, verily intent on wreaking vengeance on the Greeks. He amassed his forces and sent them in 1,200 ships to engage the Greeks, who sailed their much smaller force of men in their trireme war galleys to narrow waterways near the island of Salamis. In the strategically confined straits, the freedom-defending Greeks were brilliantly led by a famed Athenian General named Themistocles, and they were able to vanquish the larger force in a decisive victory.

Perhaps Nemesis, the Greek goddess of divine retribution, had smitten the hubris-filled Persians, arrogant with their might and riches and fervor for conquering. In any case, they retreated back to whence they came, and Herodotus, "the father of history", noted what Aeschylus had written: "All arrogance will reap a harvest rich in tears. God calls men to a heavy reckoning for overweening pride."

We are engaged in another titanic conflict between freedom and tyranny in the world again today. The character of this conflict is assessed at length herein. I feel strongly that we should give support to broadminded, inclusive, freethinking, democratic, progressive and common sense elements in society, and throw off tyrannies of economic

fundamentalism, domineering conservatism, scheming laissez faire crony capitalism, oligarchic hubris, trickle-down deceptions, authoritarianism, grave injustices, aggressive militarism and male supremacist religious authority.

A Revival of Wise Solon's Ideas

A new form of arrogance bedevils our American democracy today. It is an arrogance of wealth and privilege. Rich conservatives have been abusing their power ruthlessly, and have managed to get our representatives to let them pay taxes at rates that are near the lowest levels since 1929, despite our growing national needs and record amounts of public debt needed to finance this swindling fraud, and regardless of the urgent emergencies we are and will be encountering. They have hijacked our society to radically rig it so that privilege, wealth and power become more and more concentrated in the hands of a relative few. A bold course of corrective action is required. Some compelling lessons of history provide us with clear avenues forward that make excellent sense.

Think of the stage set back in Athens during the 6th Century BCE, when the disparity of wealth between the rich and the poor had become so extreme that the city-state was in a dangerous condition. Talk of violent revolt was being stoked in a pressure cooker of societal unrest. Wealthy persons were angry at the brazen challenge to their privileges and property, so they prepared to defend their interests and assets by force.

Moderating factions sensibly chose to give Solon, a wise and reasonable statesman and lawmaker, the power to make extensive reforms, and he made a number of eminently fair changes in the Greek political system and its economy. He gave power to the common people to elect officials, and to call their representatives to account. He basically created a new code of laws that replaced the draconian laws that the legislator Draco had established in Athens in its first written code of laws in history. Because of all the reforms he made, laying the foundations for Athenian democracy, Solon is considered to be an epically responsible father of good democratic governance.

In reaction to Solon's reforms, "The rich protested that his measures were outright confiscation; the radicals complained that he had not divided the land; but within a generation almost all agreed that his reforms had saved Athens from revolution." So declared Will and Ariel Durant in their thought-provoking book *The Lessons of History*. I love this concise 100-page book because it contains a distillation of insights the Durants had gained from studying history for decades, while writing eleven epic volumes on world history.

Today, glaring inequalities afflict the people in the United States, and disparities in wealth between the rich and the poor have reached new modern extremes. Joseph Stiglitz makes it perfectly clear in his incisive book *The Price of Inequality* how economically foolish and socially counterproductive this failing of our winner-take-all capitalist economic system is becoming -- and how pathologically harmful and amoral.

As a result of the current deep levels of inequalities -- and morphing into much worse with the pandemic -- our nation is now in a tinderbox condition. We are confronted with two possible outcomes: Either first, to have the middle class and poor people fall into increasingly desperate states of insecurity because we continue to allow the well-being of the majority to be undermined by the perpetuation of regressive taxation schemes and the imposition of austerity measures. This would compel our leaders to embark on new repressive measures and incarcerate more people in prisons to suppress the growing outrage over this degree of social unfairness and the increasing desperation of the bottom half of the populace. Alternatively, we should compromise together to make our society truly fairer by instituting dramatic structural change, together with a more steeply graduated tax system so that more money would be available to improve our healthcare system and finance education, and broaden opportunity, and reduce racial inequities, and implement other programs that make justice fairer and propitiously foster social cohesion.

The first course of action would likely lead to people eventually taking to the streets in revolt, and would have unaffordably high costs -- and would likely bring our historic experiment in democratic governance to a sad and pathetic end. So the second course of action obviously seems to be the best plan, by far.

The lessons of history teach us that the most sensible plan would be to choose wise leaders who would make smart, decent and equitable reforms. Those who do not heed the lessons of history are said to be more likely to be doomed to repeat existential errors, so let's heed the lessons! Everyone should recognize the risks Aristotle referred to in his astute observation, "Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime."

Thomas Jefferson wrote these wise and thought-provoking words: "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it away from them but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of Constitutional power." And certainly, it would be positive to get rid of leaders who fool us, and who congenitally lie to us and twist the truth, and especially those who drive divisive wedges between us to get money and gain, maintain and abuse power and control.

We should make bigger investments in our children and their future -- in universal healthcare and physical wellness, and in better and more affordable public education, notable for its reasonably liberal curricula. More money should be devoted to making communities healthier in both rural and urban areas, and to improving physical infrastructure, and in science innovation and smartly focused research and development.

I myself have never had any children, but this personal fact does not diminish the clarity with which I see the right-mindedness of a marked shift toward fairer and more sensible national priorities.

"In the nineteenth century, anti-capitalist critics like Karl Marx insisted that economics must be contained within an ethical context; they contended that social justice counted for more than industrial efficiency or private profit. In the late twentieth century, the environmental movement tried to teach us that both economics and ethics must be contained within an ecological context."

--- *The Voice of the Earth, An Exploration of Ecopsychology*, Theodore Roszak, 2002

A Spiritual Take on Our Society Today

Imagination, *n.* A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint custody.

--- Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Virgil, the famed Roman poet of antiquity, once provocatively declared: "We make our destinies by the gods we choose." Think about this. We surely should choose gods that are auspicious to the greater good, gods that help us advance positive directions in our lives and our societies. A God that elevates responsible stewardship of Earth's natural resources to a top priority would be a better God to worship than one that urges people to dominate, subjugate and exploit life on Earth without consideration for the harmful impacts these activities have on the foundations of human and biotic well-being.

Mark Twain made some interesting observations about gods in a sequel that he started to his great novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Curiously, he had written 15,000 words of this sequel in 1885, and then stopped right in the middle of a sentence, and never resumed work on it. In the pages he penned, he imagined the religion of Native Americans to be eminently sensible. Huck remarked about one of the novel's protagonists:

"He said Injuns hadn't only but two Gods, a good one and a bad one, and they never paid no attention to the good one, nor ever prayed to him or worried about him at all, but only tried their level best to flatter up the bad god and keep on the good side of him; because the good one loved them and wouldn't ever think of doing them any harm, and so there warn't any occasion to be bothering about him with prayers and things, because he was always doing the very best he could for them, anyway, and prayers couldn't better it; but all the trouble come from the bad god, who was sitting up nights to think up ways to bring them bad luck and bust up all their plans, and never fooled away a chance to do them all the harm he could; and so the sensible thing was to keep praying and fussing around him all the time, and get him to let up."

There is considerable risk in focusing on the worst elements of human nature rather than the better ones. If we pander to people who exhibit vices like gluttony, unempathetic hubris and overly selfish greed, and give inadequate respect to virtues like honorable honesty, fair-mindedness and bold commitments to advance the common good, then our societies may figuratively go to hell. If we pay attention only to our heads, and ignore our hearts, then adversities and negative outcomes are more probable. If we let the analytical left hemispheres of our brains obtusely dominate our intuitive right hemispheres, the values we hold will likely be wrong-headed.

It would be a better idea to cultivate nobler and fairer principles, and to strive to make our relationships and societies healthier, rather than retreating into tribal affiliations, ignorance and denial. And we should not allow our societies to be driven by fear, anger or control-obsessed conservatives. It is most desirable for the majority

of people to have faith in right things, and not faith in literal interpretations of Creation stories or misguided economic doctrines. "Fear Builds Walls", as they say, and this is true even with regard to biological effects of hormones on the human brain. In contrast, hope, positivity and fairness forge closer connections.

People everywhere should be free to believe in whatever God they like, and they should be guaranteed this freedom. There should also be a robust separation of church authority and the government, for the simple reason that too many abuses of power by repressive regimes have been perpetrated throughout the course of history by means of unholy alliances between religious authorities and political authorities. Just ask anyone who lives in Iran or Saudi Arabia today -- or Turkey or Russia!

Jesus was a messianic preacher in ancient Palestine who criticized both the moneychangers and the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem during his life and times. He also courageously opposed the ruthless Roman military occupation of his homeland. It is thus ironic that fundamentalist faithful folks in the Religious Right stand in staunch opposition to measures that would make our society more inclusive and equitable.

The fascinating evolutionary roots of religion and ethics in prehistoric human clans are explored in *Revelations of a Modern Prophet*. A relevant part to understand here is that overarching positive principles could provide us the best hope to deal fairly, honestly and effectively with the daunting challenges that humanity faces today.

"Look at it this way. If we worship Mammon and regard money as the most important thing in life, and allow a small group of rich people to grab the biggest share of the monetary gains generated by the exploitation of the Earth's resources, this poor priority will make us a much different people than if instead we were to extol virtues of greater social fairness and environmental justice, and commit our nation to an overarching fair-minded Bill of Rights for Future Generations."

-- *Huckleberry Finn, the Forty-Niner Gold Rush, and Sensational Related Reflections*

Be aware that Jesus was a revolutionary, and our Founders were Enlightenment progressives. In stark contrast, conservatives in recent times tend to be antagonistically anti-progressive. An Indiana Tea Party candidate who beat more moderate long-time Republican Senator Richard Lugar once said: "I have a mindset that says bipartisanship ought to consist of Democrats coming to the Republican point of view." This absurd, obtusely uncompromising mindset is antithetical to the commendable fairness principles upon which our nation was founded.

Many Republicans in the House of Representatives lost their positions to more extreme right-wing politicians in the 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020 national elections. One of these relative moderates pointed out that he believed a simply fair truism: Once a candidate is elected, he or she has a duty to work across the aisle with other people who have also been elected. This is our collaborative duty. It is the only way to achieve fairer solutions to our national and global problems. This is true common sense!

The Republican quest for ideological purity has caused the last several sessions of Congress to be among the worst ever, as judged by their record low approval ratings. A main reason for this pathetic performance is the unwillingness of radically far right politicians to sensibly compromise. And once Trump got into office, he damned bipartisanship and tried to pass legislation without any input whatsoever from Democrats.

Golden Rule fairness principles should be given priority over fervent beliefs in propagated biases, particularly when they adversely affect other people. So an honest assessment of the common good -- of everyone together -- should be made in formulating every rule, law, regulation, and spending policy. This would be a revolutionary change from designing every new plan to increase benefits for the top dogs in our society!

The highest-income earners have gained the privilege of paying the lowest tax rates since the late 1920s by abusing their influence in our political system. When we see that the human population on Earth has increased from 2 billion in 1930 to over 8 billion today, we realize that the need has grown dramatically for more money to be spent on social justice initiatives, healthcare for all, environmental protections, the conservation of natural resources, public education, sensible family planning programs, a more sound social safety net, and better plans for disaster preparedness and recovery. More spending, in other words, to create truer security.

We can no longer afford to allow political skills for rich persons to dictate tax policies that let them pay low tax rates in the face of these needs. It is a Big Lie that everyone will do better only when rich people pay low tax rates; it is a simple truism that everyone will do better only when everyone actually does better.

It is disconcerting to ponder the entire litany of harms that are being foisted onto people in future generations. To right a wrong, it is best to first understand the problem in a context that is expansive, comprehensive and accurate. Think clearly about the litany of detrimental ways we are treating the prospects of our children, and theirs, and theirs, and theirs. We are using up natural resources with profligate abandon and failing to conserve energy, mineral and water resources, and decimating wildlife habitats, destroying rainforests and damaging vital natural ecosystems. At the same time, we are allowing huge costs to be externalized, and letting corporate power rule the day rather than giving more power to the people and preserving collective bargaining rights for workers. We are spending unaffordably large amounts of money on the military and prisons, and giving very low tax rates to the highest-income earners, and financing these things by mortgaging the future with trillions of dollars of borrowed money to stimulate all these shortsighted activities.

This concatenation of expedient actions is blatantly ill advised! As Thomas Paine observed in 1776: "The present state of America is truly alarming to every person who is capable of reflection."

Thomas Paine recommended we "bring the doctrine of reconciliation to the touchstone of nature." To do so, we should admit the profound importance of healthy natural ecosystems to the well-being of humanity. Let's not deceive ourselves, and by our delay bring ruin upon our heirs in posterity.

Journalist Bill Moyers was honored with a "Global Environmental Citizen Award" by Harvard Medical School in 2004. In his acceptance speech, I once again recall, Moyers noted that when he reads the news about all the things humanity is doing in the world, he concludes that it is not as if "Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do." Instead, he looks at photos on his desk of his five grandchildren, and observes: "We do know what we are doing. We are stealing their future. Betraying their trust. Despoiling their world."

The Perspective of Dante Alighieri

In his Christian allegorical tale *The Divine Comedy*, Dante reserved the lowest places in his imagined nine circles of Hell for those who commit conscious acts of fraud or treachery against others. He regarded the worst form of treachery to be cold-hearted exploitation of family, country, friends, guests, or benefactors. He judged treachery that had the most adverse consequences in history to be the worst of all sins. Deceivers, oppressors, duplicitous hypocrites, corrupt politicians, scam artists and others who perpetrate cunning frauds can be seen today to be exceeded by a new modern form of treachery -- one that exerts its influence on a more far-reaching scale. All of us are participating in this new type of treachery -- the exploitation and defrauding of vulnerable young people and everyone in the future by means of the above-summarized litany of harms.

It has become increasingly clear in recent decades that there is a sweeping ecological extent to which all actions are interconnected, so the exploitive undermining of the prospects of people in future generations for purposes that are selfishly shortsighted is egregious beyond all other forms of folly and treachery. Bold and sensible steps should be taken to correct this state of affairs!

Dante imagined that a silver key of repentance is needed to unlock the gates of hope, together with a gold key of reconciliation. These keys to *Purgatorio* were seen as necessary for a seeker to embark on a providential path of redemption, transformation and positive change. Repent! Let's reconcile!!

Humility was regarded as the greatest virtue in medieval times, and pride was seen as the root of all sins because it contributed to our missing the mark and falling short of the ideal that a Buddhist would describe as "right relationship". I believe we can integrate the head and the heart better, and achieve a wiser balance by seeking common ground and honestly working to fairly reconcile the political right and the left.

A Salubrious Vision of More Sensible Values

Constraints necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic have caused countless numbers of people to become much more viscerally aware and appreciative of the outdoors, and of the natural world, and of open spaces and parks in

proximity. This dose of awareness and appreciation should expand into stronger support for protections of public lands and the environmental commons, and particularly of National Parks, Wilderness Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Marine Protected Areas and Wildlife Refuges. And such conservation-minded conceptions should naturally be accompanied by a growing respect for the whole host of plans and priorities that are most consistent with the *Common Good, Properly Understood*.

Fairer consideration of the legacy we are leaving to all our heirs in future generations is a principal theme of the observations contained in this Common Sense Revival. We can see, right here and now, that we're distinctly "missing the mark" in our societies in a disturbing litany of ways (a true sin!). Throughout this manifesto, extensive details of how we are failing to do the right thing are explored, with a light toward identifying and putting into effect significantly saner and more salubrious plans of action.

We have been painting ourselves into an ever-more constricted corner, in a gaudy miasma of clashing colors, by incurring record levels of national debt year after year. This is folly. Many far-reaching challenges lie ahead as the third decade of 21st century unfolds, and extraordinarily large amounts of money will be needed to deal adequately with them. (These words were written before COVID-19 spread onto the scene). We can no longer afford to continue adding to the national debt every year to finance "routine" on-going needs like extravagant costs related to the military, wars, Homeland Security, high cost Medicare drugs, and unnecessarily expensive medical procedures for people in the last months of their lives. We can't afford to continue borrowing money to give historically low tax rates to those with the highest levels of incomes, or to continue giving big corporations and investors absurdly generous tax breaks, subsidies, regulatory loopholes and allowed cost externalities.

I hope readers will give impartial attention to all the issues examined in these essays. Ambrose Bierce defined "impartial" in *The Devil's Dictionary* as "Unable to perceive any promise of personal advantage from espousing either side of a controversy, or of adopting either of two conflicting opinions." Ha! Let's objectively set aside all biases associated with our own personal vantage points for a moment, and instead focus on a fair evaluation of the overall advantages for humanity in the pursuit of saner collective undertakings, considered from the point of view of the legacy we will leave to our descendants in the future. Let's consider the long-term impact of our actions, in other words, and think and feel in the biggest picture perspectives.

Introspection into Inequality

The conclusion reached in this Common Sense Revival at the time it was first published before the November 2012 national elections, was that our country would be best served by choosing to re-elect President Obama, and to simultaneously choose moderate politicians in all Congressional races; and that, after the election, we should demand that all our representatives work together to make our country a fairer and more fiscally-sound nation, and a world leader in resource conservation and cleaner renewable energy alternatives and the promotion of ecological precautionary principles.

Robert Reich, the Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton, is a political economist who is one of the most honorable progressive voices on the American scene. His incisive perspectives are the subject of an insightful eye-opening film titled *Inequality for All* that received standing ovations when it was shown in January 2013 at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where it won top recognition for excellence in documentary filmmaking. Robert Reich and the producers of *Inequality for All* deserve congratulations for having created a valuable film. I highly recommend that everyone watch it. Shame on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences for not having given this important film the recognition and visibility of a deserved Oscar nomination!

Professor Reich cogently explains the extent to which economic inequality hurts people and society as a whole, and the degree to which inequality undermines people's ability to fairly pursue happiness and well-being in their lives. Bob, as he is known to his friends, hearteningly expressed optimism about our collective ability to make the USA relatively more equitable for all. It is an encouraging idea that the prospects are good for us to reform our economic and political systems, and to really make our nation a much fairer one. Optimism and positive vision, after all, can help us be more effective in achieving goals consistent with the greater good. Perhaps such perspective could inoculate us against the propaganda and narrow crony favoritism that are contributing to making the U.S.

policies so anti-egalitarian. Positive attitudes can provide us with a powerful impetus to rectify our distorted national priorities by understanding the challenging specific ways that we are insensibly allowing narrowly-focused interest groups to wrong-headedly determine these priorities.

An unexpectedly effective use of a simple visual aid is employed in the film *Inequality for All*. A graph that charts trends in income inequality over the past century in the U.S. is superimposed over a graphic depiction of a suspension bridge similar to the beautiful iconic Golden Gate Bridge. A steep increase in income inequality over the decade of the Roaring Twenties corresponds to the rise of the bridge's cables from one end of their anchorage to the top of the first suspension tower. Then, as income inequality diminished from 1930 through 1980, the graph follows the bridge's suspension cables downward toward mid-span, corresponding to a decline in economic disparities between people that resulted from public policies designed to create broader prosperity and a stronger middle class through a New Deal social safety net. Then, beginning with the increasingly unfair public policies instituted by Ronald Reagan, a new episode of narrowly concentrated wealth has traced a trajectory upwards until it is reaching a new peak near the bridge's second tower.

Symbolically, the cables that lead back down to their second safe anchorage provide good hope that we will once again find the intellectual clarity and political will to implement fairer public policies that will emphasize a more stable and sustainable future. Such a broad-minded approach would represent the greater good for all.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz echoes and amplifies understandings similar to the ones articulated by Robert Reich. In Stiglitz' important book, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, he makes it abundantly clear that, in recent decades, broad inequities in the U.S. have been made much worse. He posited in this 2012 book that the reason for this is a pathetic one: because our political system is structured to be "of the 1%, for the 1%, by the 1%". Joseph Stiglitz makes many compelling observations about the true nature of exorbitant costs associated with extreme social inequalities in human societies, and provides a convincing analysis of the failings of our economic and political systems. He also proposes an auspicious variety of wiser ways forward.

Stiglitz points out that our economic system is too unstable and inefficient, and that it periodically creates too much unemployment and too many inequities. Since our economic and political systems are having the effect of concentrating wealth at the top, the populace as a whole is being adversely affected in many ways. Our systems facilitate the foisting of a wide range of healthcare costs and environmental harms onto society, mainly so that businesses can maximize their profits in the short run. This causes harm to millions of workers, consumers and citizens. Associated damages to natural ecosystems are undermining the foundations upon which our overall well-being depends, now and in the future. By allowing such developments, we are also harming the health and survival prospects of millions of other species of life. Let's be honestly pro-life!

Extreme inequality is one aspect of the intense class struggles that motivated Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx in 1848 to write their notorious and ideologically exploited *Communist Manifesto*. These famous early "worldly philosophers" described a "spectre" of worker exploitation and class warfare that was haunting industrial capitalist societies, and they examined the morbid manifestations associated with the inequities involved and the unmitigated social ills of early industrial activities.

Wealthy investor Warren Buffet declared in 2006: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." Five years later, he added: "Through the tax code, there has been class warfare waged, and my class has won. It's been a rout." I have always personally admired a good quality of magnanimity in winners, and felt a contrasting degree of umbrage toward those who exhibit jealously mean-spirited or excessively greedy or prideful hubristic self-satisfaction when they triumph. Smugly narcissistic gloating and excessive self-congratulations are small-minded, and not a pretty thing, and often tend to manifest themselves in unacceptably consequentially harmful ways.

I strongly believe that we can and should create fairer and more sensible civilizations, and this Common Sense Revival helps identify excellent ways that this can be accomplished. Throw Mitch McConnell out of office!

When Thomas Paine urged American colonists to seek independence from despotic British rule, he declared: "The

Sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed-time of Continental union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound would enlarge with the tree, and posterity read in it full grown characters." An image arises of people in posterity sitting in real rueful judgment of our obtusely selfish, antagonized, ideological and shortsighted follies today.

Virtuous Economic Circles versus Vicious Economic Circles

One thing that makes an economy stable and prosperous is a strong and vibrant middle class. In the three prosperous decades after World War II, the biggest and best-educated middle class in the world was created by means of initiatives like the G.I. Bill and investments in the expansion of public universities, and the empowerment of labor unions to give workers more bargaining power. The basic compact at the heart of the American economy was that employers rewarded productivity increases and paid their workers enough for hard work to buy the products American employers were selling. That basic bargain created a "virtuous circle" of higher living standards, more jobs, better wages, and more inclusive prosperity.

Robert Reich visually describes this provocative example of a virtuous circle in the film *Inequality for All*. When productivity grows in businesses, then profits and wages increase, and workers buy more, companies hire more, tax revenues increase, governments invest more, and workers are better educated. In distinct contrast, a "vicious circle" can be created in which there is a downward spiral because the middle class doesn't share in economic gains. As their wages stagnate, a vicious circle begins in which workers buy less, companies downsize, unemployment rises, tax revenues decline, budget deficits grow, government investments and programs are cut, and citizens and workers are not educated as well as they should be.

The contrast between the outcomes of virtuous circles and vicious circles is one of the grandest conceptions clearly conveyed in *Inequality for All*. Note that virtuous circles and vicious circles refer to complex chains of events that reinforce themselves through feedback loops. A virtuous circle has favorable results, while vicious circles tend to have the unintended consequence of producing outcomes that are generally detrimental to the majority and to society and humanity as a whole.

The wealthiest 1% of Americans simply cannot consume enough, no matter how hard they try, to generate the economic stimulus that a more affluent middle class could. The secret to a stronger economy is to invest in education and to increase household incomes with a decent minimum wage, higher pay for overtime work, and stronger unions, and to raise skill levels, thereby generating sustained consumer demand. Strong economies like Germany's pursue such virtuous circle policies. In Germany, workers are highly skilled and well educated, and collective bargaining rights are protected, and the middle class has money to spend -- and they also have significantly more leisure time than American workers, a factor that helps enjoy them a better quality of life.

In contrast, falling real wages during a vicious circle undermines consumer demand, and this leads to shrinking output and higher rates of joblessness. Such trends make the economy fragile, and they boost social instability. When the middle class is skating on thin ice, and jobs offer low wages and poor benefits, the prospects for all are diminished. The devious "trickle-down" narrative repetitiously spoon-fed to the middle class and working class folks in America is simply not true. "Post-truth" deceptions cannot override reality.

When wealth is too heavily concentrated in the hands of few, the amount spent on public schools, vital physical infrastructure and social programs is cut, and stresses intensify. Too many people end up without an adequate education, and millions of people work long hours and do not have enough money to spend, and have little leisure time, so they have a lesser quality of life. When riches gush up into the hands of a monopolizing few, hardships cascade down. Politicians who push such an agenda for their own selfish advantages are socially deplorable.

Increases in social stresses make people more vulnerable to ill health, mental depression, drug overdoses, and violence. The bane of a poorly controlled pandemic, heightened inequalities and more people living in poverty and desperate circumstances are among the most serious of these stresses. The negative effects of stress are a biological fact; even trees subjected to increased stresses like drought, acid rain or forest fragmentation become

increasingly vulnerable to diseases like Sudden Oak Death, or to lethal insect infestations like those by mountain pine beetles. In recognizing this, we should act to reduce the health and financial stress that the majority of Americans face.

Author Naomi Wolf asked Robert Reich what three policy prescriptions he would give to an American president and Congress. Professor Reich replied that we should return to what was done successfully in the 35 years after World War II, when prosperity was more broadly shared. Specifically, he indicated that we should make larger investments in public education, including in higher education, and in physical infrastructure, and these initiatives should be funded by a smarter, fairer and more progressive system of taxation. Excellent ideas!

I just used the word "deplorable" with awareness to its supercharged connotations. Certainly a contributing factor to Hillary Clinton's 2016 election loss was her characterization of Trump supporters as "deplorables." This accusation was a big mistake, for it motivated conservatives to turn out to oppose her, and of course it can be said that there are some "fine people" on both sides of the amped up tribal divide. However, the act itself of supporting Trump today in 2022 is certainly deeply deplorable and lamentable, and deserving of strong condemnation, by any objective assessment. Just look at Trump's self-serving con man agenda, his deadly politicizing of health safety measures during the pandemic, his devious twisting of the truth, his big lie about the 2020 election, his incitement of the January 6 insurrection, and his financial corruption, democracy-undermining ploys, racist rhetoric, discriminatory policies, harmful divide-to-conquer tactics, fatuously demented beliefs, scandalous behaviors, political malfeasance, self-dealing, efforts to wrongfully politicize science and silence experts, misuses of pardon power, history of tax evasion, egregious violations of propriety and the rule of law, and treachery against the best interests of women, Blacks, Latinos and the poor. Look at his despotic abuses of power, and unconstitutional evasions of the checks and balances in government that were designed to assure transparency and oversight to protect people from abuses of authority by holding transgressors appropriately accountable for misdeeds. These unethically immoral traits are made worse by his betrayals of allies in cozying up to foreign power-abusing autocrats, and by cruel policies that separated immigrant and refugee children from their parents, and by his extreme lack of fiscal, social and environmental responsibility that constitute a betrayal of all persons in future generations. A reckoning is due for these gross betrayals of the public trust.

Economics as a Morality Play

There are influential motives for portraying economics as a morality play, and for making this a tale of excesses and their consequences. "We lived beyond our means, the story goes, and now we're paying the inevitable price. Economists can explain ad nauseam that this is wrong, that the reason we have mass unemployment isn't that we spent too much in the past, but that we're spending too little now, and that this problem can and should be solved. No matter; many people have a visceral sense that we have sinned and must seek redemption through suffering -- and neither economic argument nor the observation that the people now suffering are not at all the same people who sinned during the bubble years makes much of a dent."

While it is erroneous to regard economic activities as a morality play in this way, there is another sense in which work activities themselves can be regarded as a morality play, and the judgment in this is clear: the 1% of people who largely control the economic system are acting like bad guys. The fact of the matter is that the agenda of those who advocate austerity policies looks a lot like a simple expression of upper class preferences wrapped in a facade of academic rigor. "What the top 1% wants becomes what economic science says we must do." And, "it's not just a matter of emotion versus logic. You can't understand the influence of austerity doctrine without talking about class and inequality."

In *Inequality for All*, Robert Reich cogently examines the deep inequities and adverse effects of rising economic inequality in America. Middle class wages, it is revealed, actually dropped in the economic recovery from 2009 to 2012, while the top 1% of people reaped 95% of the gains made. Professor Reich expresses heartening optimism that, by working together, Americans could change this undesirable dynamic. We succeeded in doing this between 1930 and 1980, so we can do it again today! From this standpoint, it is surely a disastrous mistake for the American people to have allowed Trump, Pence and McConnell to have hubristically grabbed power.

Emmanuel Saez, a French economist and Professor of Economics at UC Berkeley, has confirmed this fact that the

richest 1% of Americans made almost all the gains in the economic recovery after the 2008 economic crisis, and that middle class wages in effect fell, on a real inflation-adjusted basis. Inequality of this magnitude is "poisoning our society and making a mockery of the American dream of equal opportunity," Professor Saez says. He recommends higher taxes on rich people, with marginal federal tax rates on the highest levels of income of at least 70%, like they were every year from 1936 to 1980.

Economic strategies that would help create good jobs and more widespread prosperity would be better than current strategies designed mainly to increase corporate profits and stock prices in the short run. Such better plans include providing better education by making it more affordable and more accountable for improved outcomes; eliminating payroll taxes on the first \$15,000 of income; raising the cap on income subject to payroll taxes; giving workers more bargaining power; increasing the federal minimum wage; making workplaces fairer for women and paying them equal amounts for the same work; creating a safer and more stable economic system; and reducing the risks and costs of bank bailouts by reducing the multiples of leverage allowed.

Extreme levels of income inequality represent a new kind of "inconvenient truth", to use the term Al Gore employed with regard to the risks of global warming. This new inconvenient truth reveals the dark side of unfairness in our econopolitical system, and its negative impacts on poor people and the middle class.

Political Aside - Agitated Emotions and Crucial Understandings

Many Americans regard people in either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party as being traitorous to the country. We have become victims of divide-to-conquer politicians, and must now throw off the perverse despotism of their manipulative power by rightly joining together in common cause to demand sensible reforms within BOTH parties, so that we will succeed in honestly and honorably making our government "of the people, by the people, and for the people". This will propitiously have the collateral benefit of helping assure those in future years that the legacy we leave them will not be one of overly dystopian consequences. Ominous images impinge on our consciousness -- and lives.

We should demand that our political representatives strive to create greater fairness in our society, and work to create foundations for peaceable coexistence that are conducive to cooperative collaboration and the vitally positive quality of social cohesion.

It is critically important that we see accurately -- and vote accordingly -- for the safety, security, prosperity, freedom, happiness, environmental justice, sustainability and sanity of *We the People*.

As our global population continues to increase by more than 80 million babies every year, the signs are becoming startlingly clear that we are exceeding the carrying capacity of our home planet for our kind. We are using up resources and polluting the atmosphere, and our activities in aggregate are destabilizing the global climate. We must take bold steps to alter this risk-laden state of affairs.

Many imbalances are involved in our carrying capacity conundrum in a world of finite limits, and to begin to rectify them, and in the interests of advancing the greater good, the least measure we must take is to have the responsible forbearance **NOT TO FORCE PREGNANT WOMEN TO DELIVER AGAINST THEIR WILLS, REGARDLESS OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES.**

It is trespassingly wrong to treat every woman who becomes pregnant like a forced labor inmate in a baby-delivering prison camp under the dictate of cocky politicians.

~ Freedom, brothers!

~~ Equality, compatriots!

~~~ Peace, fellow countrypersons!

~~~~ RESPECT, soulfully croons Aretha ...

Stop the Steal - REALLY

Those who blindly believe the election lies that say Trump won the 2020 election (which he lost by 7 million votes) are engaging in defensive psychological projection, claiming that Democrats are extremists and cheaters in elections despite the evidence overwhelmingly pointing to the fact that the 2020 elections were free, fair and

secure. As a matter of contrasting fact, the political system in the U.S. is radically rigged against Democrats, where Republicans in red states have created extreme gerrymanders that disenfranchise millions of people, and the conservative news media and targeted propaganda on social media sites gives Republicans excessive influence that is neither merited nor desirable for the freedom and well-being of the populace.

Wisconsin is one of the worst states for having outrageously gerrymandered districts that give Republicans near supermajority influence in the state legislature even though the electorate leans about half Democratic and half Republican. *The Wisconsin GOP is showing us how stealing state elections is done*, Ja'han Jones wrote in late 2021, and Wisconsin's Supreme Court is egregiously "helping Republicans keep gerrymandering maps that will solidify Republican control for a decade."

Republicans in many states are using cunningly manipulative lies about election fraud to devastating effect to restrict voting rights to help them win elections, with one cynical motive being "to own the libs". But look who really gets "owned" as a terrible result of Republicans succeeding in deceiving people and scaring them and fooling them into blaming Democrats, when the fault for the dire state of problems is largely of their own making through their compulsive pandering to the rich, giant corporations and right-wing Christian nationalists.

Those who get "owned" include: (1) Women who are subjected to heinous treatment as victims of forced birther politicians who take away one of the most consequential of all rights — that of the freedom to make their own decisions with doctors in matters of their health, well-being, safety, bodily autonomy and destiny. (2) Everyone that is not well-to-do, due to reactionary skills for the wealthy pushing a deceitful and harm-engendering agenda of regressive tax cuts, austerity measures to shred social safety net programs and on-going national debt swindles. (3) those who honorably stand for responsible climate action and protections of the public lands, Wilderness Areas, the environmental commons and endangered species. (4) Dreamers, immigrants and desperate refugees whose hopes and dreams for safety and opportunity are crushed under the iron heel of antagonistic fear-mongering and scapegoating by demagogues, liars, hypocrites and charlatans. (5) Poor people and desperate people and the homeless whose problems are made insufferably worse by "conservative" strategies that lead to increased inequalities and injustices that are part and parcel of the right-wing agenda. (6) Decency, respectable moderation and truth itself, as devious politicians weaponize lies and fears to impose reactionary social engineering measures on the populace. And, (7) Safety and stability, as red state politicians work to create chaos in elections and reduce accountability for abuses of power, and compound this by using repressive police forces and harsh incarceration policies to enforce increasingly draconian laws that are passed to protect wealthy people from the discontents of the disenfranchised and the unnecessarily oppressed. Stop the steal through reforms!

Cries for Secession

In the immediate aftermath of the 2012 national elections, some folks in "red states" had a temper tantrum about President Obama's victory and declared they wanted to secede from the Union. After the 2016 elections, people in blue states responded with similar feelings. The red state reaction was especially interesting because of the fact that most of the people afflicted with secession fervor in red states ironically receive much more in benefits from the federal government, on average, than they pay in taxes. The balance is the opposite in blue states, which pay more in total to the federal government than they get in return. If people in relatively poor states like Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee, and West Virginia were allowed to secede, Dana Milbank asserted that this "Confederacy of Takers" would face serious fiscal problems, and the remaining "Union of the Makers" would be financially better off. "Would-be rebels from the red states should keep in mind during the coming budget battle," Milbank stated, "that those who are most ardent about cutting federal government spending tend to come from parts of the country that most rely on it."

Perhaps we should actually have let those red states secede, and see if they become paragons of economic, social and environmental health -- or, more likely, unmitigated disasters! "Let them take their inequities, unfair social policies, anti-immigrant fervor, anti-environmentalism, latent and overt racism, and enthusiasms for guns, harsh justice and the death penalty, and try to manage their republic according to these narrow ideologies without the net benefits they receive from the federal government. It is likely that circumstances would prove, in coming years, that it is a delusion to think that fundamentalist doctrines are better than fairer understandings, sensibly

balanced priorities and a stronger democracy. The experience in Kansas of the then governor Sam Brownback slashing taxes in 2012 to benefit high-income folks proved definitively that ideology, divorced from reality, can be disastrous for the people."

Ponder the psychological underpinnings of the legend-like myth that says there are two kinds of people in the world, the Makers and the Takers. The Makers are portrayed like heroic individualists in an Ayn Rand novel; they create wealth and jobs in a nobly virtuous struggle against workers and onerous government regulations. This myth contemptuously treats workers as Takers who want good compensation and benefits for their labors and expect a social safety net in hard times. It basically says workers are parasites on heroic job creators. Entrepreneurs, financiers, CEOs and inventors are regarded as Makers, while workers are seen as Takers who are lazy and want more than anything not to work so hard, and to collect undeserved wages, unemployment benefits or food stamps.

Right-wing pundit Ann Coulter was extremely discouraged at the outcome of the national elections in Nov. 2012. She declared, "If Mitt Romney cannot win in this economy, then the tipping point has been reached. We have more takers than makers and it's over. There is no hope." Ann Coulter was completely off base about this. Her convictions were stubbornly ideological, and they should have yielded to more balanced points of view! There is much hope for our country, but to actually realize these hopes, a reasonable opposition party is needed in our two-party political system, a Party that is fair-minded rather than one that panders to the rich and is radically uncompromising, dogmatic, hyper-partisan, dishonest, self-righteous, fear mongering, and prone to the use of "hostage-taking tactics".

A political cartoon in the newspaper in November 2012 showed an angry white man wearing a T-shirt that read SECESSION and toting a gun, and he was pointing to a barbed-wire border crossing. There, a sign read: NOW ENTERIN' ANGRYWHITEMENISTAN. The disheveled guy in the cartoon is singing the virtues of this new confederacy, telling a skeptical Uncle Sam, "It's full up of freedom-lovers just like me, and it's gonna be paradise." No civil war is necessary over this issue!

The 2012 secession hoopla died down pretty quickly, but the anger of conservatives over hot button social issues continues to boil, especially as conflicts intensify over healthcare, contraception, abortion, marriage equality, immigration, racism, voting rights, democracy, gun safety measures international trade policies and both Islamic and domestic extremism. A psychologist might analyze the collective yowl of secession fervor as a mixture of anger, humiliated frustration and self-righteous indignation at being defeated and not getting their way. This anger persists, simmering in fervor over hot button issues and misguided misunderstanding of the depths to which reactionary movements are exploited by moneyed interests to inimically advance a narrow, inequitable and anti-democratic concentration of wealth in the hands of the few.

Policies that amplify unfairness and increase concentrations of wealth in the hands of the few have another malign tendency: to concentrate power more narrowly and rigidly. It is a convenience for the rich to be able to use the growing influence of their increasing wealth to skew our national priorities, but since this trend is so contrary to our nation's best interests, apologists for such outcomes are distinctly misguided! National policies that exacerbate inequities are creating anti-egalitarian feedback loops that threaten our future well-being -- and that of our children and grandchildren. They also threaten the soundness of our economy and the health of natural ecosystems, despite the fact that these are a bedrock of all future prosperity, flourishing and survival.

The radical right had a scary presence in Dallas in 1963 when President John Kennedy was assassinated. Many Texans called Kennedy a traitor at that time. Today, the radical right has grown into a national presence, as one observer pointed out in newspapers as the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination approached. After likening vituperative talk by the radical right to a hothouse, the observer wrote: "It's what occurs when a handful of people hijack the microphone, turn up the volume, and push away from the center to the point where the fabric appears to break and hysteria and fanaticism takes root." Trump has mined this vein with maniacal fervor. Safe harbors are under threat, and political violence has been spiking in the past five years.

Let's be reasonable, folks, and remember the Enlightenment Era principles upon which our great nation was founded. And let's appreciate the wisdom and Golden Rule fairness of the progressive evolution that has taken place in the last two centuries in many arenas.

The Consequences of Austerity

Austerity programs generally contribute to a vicious circle, so they make particularly poor sense when economic activities are faltering. When hyper-stimulative economic policies and a deregulation of financial markets and excessive speculation created an economic bubble in real estate in 2007, the bubble was unstable and it eventually burst. This created a financial crisis and subsequent economic recession and rapidly mounting debt that countries worldwide have been struggling to emerge from ever since. This imprudence made us pathetically poorly prepared when emergency pandemic needs suddenly arose.

I believe it's a good idea to honestly evaluate both sides of any argument. This helps in being able to objectively determine the best courses of action. We should keep in mind, however, that both sides of an argument are not equally valid. Reasonable considerations of probable consequences can make it clear which point of view is most accurate. And we should realize that there is no correlation between the size of a megaphone that amplifies a position and the validity of the perspective it expresses. Likewise, there is no positive correlation between the intensity of feeling revealed in an unhinged tweet storm and common sense, or demented rantings by Trump on the White House coronavirus briefing stage in 2020 and public health. "Don't drink poisonous disinfectants!"

Legitimate disagreements exist over every hotly contested issue. Opposing viewpoints tend to generate a fog of reasonable-sounding arguments for their particular points of view. Since we are in a Bet Situation and must choose which course to chart, it is important to develop a good way to decide what national policies should be pursued and the priorities that should be given to them.

How can we best make such determinations in the heat of the contest? A good answer to this question can be found in the moral philosophy of *consequentialism*. This philosophical theory asserts a simple value, that the real consequences of any given course of action are the ultimate basis for judgments about its relative rightness or wrongness. Thus, the degree of positive or negative outcomes associated with any policy choice is the true measure of the legitimacy of all arguments for it or against it. To find clarity, the best way to assess an argument concerning a given course of action is by honestly evaluating the probable consequences of taking the action -- or of not taking the action.

Social Insurance

Consider the social programs in the U.S. today that make life a little easier for everyone on the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. There are many programs that benefit unemployed people and retirees, veterans, disabled people, college students and those too young to vote. They include unemployment insurance, disability insurance, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Pell grants for higher education, a Children's Health Insurance Program, and food stamps. These programs can accurately be seen as forms of social insurance that serve to reduce tensions between the privileged people on Easy Street, who have the lion's share of the world's wealth, and the bottom 50% of the populace who are all somewhere in the vicinity of financial desperation.

People on Easy Street jealousy guard their privileges, often exhibiting unempathetic and even hostile attitudes toward underprivileged people. This is ironic considering that people on Easy Street have generally gained their great privileges, in large part, by reaping the benefits of the rigged ways our economic and political systems are established. The most blatant instance of such favoritism is found in provisions that are essentially welfare programs for corporations, and in those dang tax laws that allow high-income earners to pay nearly the lowest tax rates in many generations. In pathetic contrast, the poorest 25% of Americans have a net worth of zero or less, and the bottom 50% of Americans has an average family net worth of less than \$40,000. These people are extremely insecure in their finances, and this state of affairs profoundly negatively affects their lives.

Think about the concept of social insurance in this context. This is a capital idea. Since social programs that provide benefits to the bottom 50% of Americans are a form of insurance that somewhat mitigates the desperate circumstances of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society, these programs dampen impulses toward either criminal activity or increases in revolutionary unrest. This insurance basically allows the most privileged people to maintain many of their perks and privileges, and to continue being the main beneficiaries of the way our econopolitical system is structured.

Despite the fact that social insurance programs are partially a means of protecting the interests of rich people, many wealthy people have perversely been increasingly unwilling to finance these insurance policies. They apparently prefer that more money be spent on police, prisons, wars and Homeland Security. One result is that the USA has the highest rate of incarceration per capita of any nation on Earth, and suffers unnecessarily grave injustices. Another is that we spend more money on our military than most other nations combined.

Hard-nosed stances, as can be seen in these broad contexts, are foolishly myopic. Nonetheless, many wealthy conservatives arrogantly act in ways that are increasingly stingy, uncompassionate, greedy and outrageously anti-social. As my friend the underground Mole once observed, "Conservatism is bedeviled by pig belief that the rich must at all costs be allowed to perpetuate their good fortune."

Our society functioned better in terms of public financing of schools, infrastructure, government operations, research and development and national defense during the years from 1936 to 1980 when the top income tax rate was 70% or more every year. Astonishingly, the tax rate on the highest levels of income was 90% or more every year from 1944 until 1964. This high tax rate was put in place for 3 compelling purposes:

First, to finance large public investments in education, post-war re-tooling, and building infrastructure.

Second, to prevent moneyed interests from gaining a concentration of wealth and power that would allow them to dominate our political system and "challenge our government to a trial of strength and bid defiance to the laws of our country," as Thomas Jefferson put it. Jefferson was an admirable shining light of the Enlightenment Era -- "the Age of Reason". When he made this observation long ago, he reasonably and presciently foresaw the dangers of abuses of power by corporations and the wealthy.

And third, to roughly balance budgets during this period, so that the relative size of the debt incurred during World War II would diminish as the economy grew and moderate inflation took place. The national debt exceeded 100% of GDP by the end of World War II for the only time in history until then. By 1964, despite the fact that the debt had not been reduced, the proportion that the debt represented of the growing GDP had gone down from its high above 120% in 1946 to 60%. Note that the national debt once again began exceeding 100% of the GDP in 2012, up from a post-World War II low of under 40% from 1970 to 1982. We're excessively exploiting this expediency! And the Trump administration began borrowing more than \$1.5 trillion in December 2017 to finance huge tax breaks that are primarily benefitting giant corporations and the highest income earners. When the pandemic struck, Congress agreed to borrow almost \$3 trillion in April 2020 alone, and big chunks of the borrowing were designed to bail out big businesses, rather than help all the little folk hurt by the sudden advent of dire economic malaise.

"Figures often beguile me, particularly when I have the arranging of them myself; in which case the remark attributed to Disraeli would often apply with justice and force: 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics.'"

--- Mark Twain

Statistics are prone to "the Curse of Knowledge" phenomena. Let's try to transcend the mind-numbing affects they have, because statistics can give us valuable insights, and also convey credibility and give us understandings that could become a powerful incentive for us to rally support for reform efforts and positive changes.

Think again about the fact that Ronald Reagan launched his anti-tax revolution in 1981 by pandering to moneyed interests to such an extreme extent that the highest marginal tax rates were reduced from 70% in 1981 to 28% by 1988, rashly driving up the national debt. It was crazy to make this radical reduction to allow people on Easy Street to pay the lowest tax rates in generations at a time of big and expanding needs. This folly is a pathetic reflection of the anti-democratic nature of abuses of concentrated wealth and power. Simply seen, tax reforms that are more broadly fair must be enacted.

Economic fundamentalists who espouse trickle-down deceptions have been leaders of the movement to cut taxes and eliminate financial regulations. This movement has been backed by influence-abusing wealthy people and shrewdly Machiavellian politicians, along with people in right-wing think tanks, bombastic talk radio personalities, argumentative talking heads in the echo chamber of Fox News, and judgmental religious fundamentalists. And Tea

Party politicians and Freedom Caucus puppets in the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate have given undue power to this movement by adamantly opposing fair compromises.

In Britain, the conservative government just experienced one of the biggest fiascos in its financial and political history in September and October 2022. Liz Truss became Prime Minister after the Trump-like Boris Johnson flamed out, and she reckoned that she could emulate Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan by pushing for more debt-financed tax cuts targeted to benefit the rich. This ill-timed and ill-advised misjudgment resulted in a drastic decline in financial markets, and forced her to resign after having the shortest tenure as Prime Minister in British history, at only 44 days.

Many people who adhere to such dogmas actually have interests that are much more in common with the 99% than with the goals and agendas of billionaires like industrialists in the Koch network or the gambling industry magnate Sheldon Adelson (who died in January 2021), or the dastardly Mercer family. But instead of seeking common cause, Trump Republicans have emotionally hijacked their supporters into going along with narrow-minded goals that actually undermine their own self-interest and the common good. Their passions have been exploited by shrewd operatives to give rich people more and more perks, privileges and power. It's as if the colonists involved in the Boston Tea Party in December 1773 had inexplicably decided to embrace the priorities of Tea Conglomerate ship owners and the taxing authorities of the British Empire -- rather than opposing taxation without fair representation and rejecting despotic rule!

Thomas Piketty states in his prominent economic tome *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* that Karl Marx's principal conclusion was what could be called the 'principle of infinite accumulation'. By this, Marx meant the inexorable tendency for capital to accumulate and become concentrated in ever fewer hands, with no natural limit to the process. It was for this good reason that Marx predicted an apocalyptic end to capitalism. As it turns out, things are more complicated than that, and technological progress and increasing productivity and progressive political reforms have served, to a certain extent, as a partial counterweight to the process of wealth accumulation and the concentration of private capital and monopolies on power. But today, with regressive debt-financed tax cuts and the accumulation of wealth growing to new neo-Gilded Age extremes, this state of affairs is becoming excessively destabilizing and is likely to result in either revolutionary conflicts or authoritarian repression that would be necessary to perpetuate the corrupt status quo.

It is clearly time for America to change course, and head in more sensible directions. I urge all Americans to contact their representatives and ask them to make fairer efforts to reform our national tax policies. This would be a good path toward an improved overall well-being for the majority of Americans. Bruce Springsteen croons out a song in my imagination about a social wrecking ball, and I dream that this image of a wrecking ball will set the stage for a resurrected greater edifice that will provide a better modicum of fairness. I heartily encourage Trump cronies to see the truth in these ideas and alter their brutally devious anti-egalitarian course.

An Ideological Virus Infects the World

Thomas Paine was a religious man, so he made a distinction between the idolizing of gods that are embodiments of natural human attributes and a contrasting idolizing of kings, priests and wealthy people, who are merely other men. How did it come to be, he wondered, that "a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest?" He publicly questioned the motives of those who dominate society, asking "whether they are the means of happiness -- or of misery -- to mankind."

Listen to some rationalizations made by such exalted eminences. Riches, according to financier J.P. Morgan, are "the reward of toil and virtue." Ha! Anyone who studies some of the unethical means by which J.P. Morgan gained his riches might strongly disagree. He had speculated shrewdly during the Panic of 1857 and garnered considerable wealth by investing in securities that had plunged in value. Then, in the dastardly "Hall Carbine Affair", he bought thousands of defective muskets for \$3.50 each, early in the Civil War, and re-sold them to a General in the field for \$22 each. These short rifles had serious defects: they would sometimes blow the thumb off a soldier who tried to use one of them. A Congressional committee noted this fact in the fine print of an obscure report way back then, but a federal judge upheld the deal as a fulfillment of a valid legal contract. J.P. Morgan went on to become one of the richest financiers and industrialists of his era.

Another rich guy, John D. Rockefeller, wholeheartedly agreed with J.P. Morgan's assessment of the remarkable righteousness of the wealthy. He went so far as to state that riches are "a gift from Heaven signifying, <This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased>". Oh, sure, sure! Jesus, in dramatic contrast, purportedly said that rich people are going to have a hell of a hard time getting into Heaven unless they show more empathy and generosity to poor people and the downtrodden.

Prominent labor union leader Eugene Debs scoffed at such self-congratulatory attitudes of the rich. Debs, who ran for president five times in the early twentieth century, once stated, "Riches are the savings of many in the hands of a few!" This characterization is much more accurate than the presumption that those who have the most money in the world are mainly virtuous and deserving people who God likes best. *Great Gatsby!*

Many wealthy conservatives today seem to be insensitive to social injustices, for they sure do have lots of rationalizations for unjust policies that hurt others in the name of God, profit, tax evasion, tribal affiliation and/or ideological righteousness.

It's instructive to recall that during the eighteenth century, kings were still asserting the "divine right" of the monarchy. Yep, this theory held that the right to rule arose directly from the will of God. So, God willed it -- and the peons had to either go along with it or suffer the consequences. "According to the doctrine of the divine right of kings, only God can judge an unjust king," states the Wikipedia consensus. This doctrine implies that any attempt to depose the king, or even to restrict his power, runs contrary to the will of God, and it may even constitute a sacrilegious act. Acting in ways that a monarch considered to be treasonous is danger enough, and to compound this by taking a risk of being eternally damned due to sacrilege would be practically crazy. Nonetheless, the desperate need for reform finally drove the French people to overthrow their king in 1789.

Strong parallels exist between rationalizations that support monarchy and those that grease the wheels of domineering influence by the rich. In most monarchies throughout history, curiously, holy leaders of one Church or another frequently collaborated with the elevated souls in the nobility to help control, exploit and oppress the populace. Both kings and the Church shared the ambition of making sure no one violated God's plan, so that the rulers could maintain their exalted positions. Reading up on the history of French rule during the eighteenth century, it is startling to realize how corrupt the politics were then, and how venal and promiscuous the morals were of the "nobility". The colorful Madame de Pompadour, royal mistress of King Louis XVI, could have given us an earful about the scandalous shenanigans that went on in those days. Today, many of the world's ultra-rich do not seem to be any more ethical than those rascals in the prerevolutionary French aristocracy!

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny was an early example of a multitude of spurious rationalizations that say God favors a domineering group over an oppressed one. Manifest Destiny held that it was moral and inevitable that American settlers should expand across the continent, and this conviction was used to justify a war with Mexico over the Republic of Texas, as well as the forcible removal of numerous tribes of Native Americans from their traditional lands. Such imperialistic expansionism involved exceptionally ruthless and unjust offensives, and exterminations. All modern instances of similar rationalizations should be rejected for their glaring injustices.

J.P. Morgan, in any case, was one of the classic robber barons of his time. In all fairness, he did use his riches, eventually, for some redeeming purposes. He played a key role in leading a coalition of bankers that saved the financial system during the Panic of 1907, and he became a generous philanthropist, so he wasn't a completely greedy or unempathetic man. He ironically died in 1913, just 9 months before Congress gave birth to the Federal Reserve central banking system. The Fed was established to provide emergency measures to rescue the economy in future economic panics and recessions.

Two-time Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney was a classic representative of the super-rich subset of the wealthiest 1% of Americans whose self-rationalizations and ideological perspectives oozed with superiority and contempt at "the lazy laborers" who cost businesses so much in wages and benefits, and unemployment benefits when they are laid off. Romney exulted in his good fortune at having amassed a large fortune through enormously profitable private equity schemes, and he tried to obscure the often-scurrilous means by which he personally gained these big bucks. Then Donald Trump came along and refused to release his tax returns, almost certainly to avoid the disclosure of many ways, legal and illegal, that he has taken advantage of real estate law to avoid paying

taxes. Other illicit shenanigans and malfeasance abound.

After World War I and the Roaring Twenties, sure enough the Federal Reserve was needed to deal with another even more cataclysmic economic setback, the worst in American history -- the Great Depression. The Fed made mistakes in their response to this severe economic contraction of the 1930s by tightening the money supply instead of flooding markets with liquidity. It also let thousands of banks fail instead of finding a smart way to save them and gain large benefits for taxpayers as a reward for the action. Securing benefits for taxpayers has a much fairer ring to it than spending trillions of dollars to bail out the banking system and then having financial institutions rebound to make record profits using cheap money provided by the Fed, while people on Main Street as a whole struggle with deep insecurities. And since early 2020, no one has talked much about the reliance on deficit financing to cope with the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Right Action and the Ten Commandments

One of my pet theories is that expansive understandings are the key to eventual right action. I strongly believe the common good can be achieved by seeking the most far-sighted balance between selfish individualism and the collective good. To accomplish greater good goals, more win-win solutions to problems should be instituted. A sensible long-term perspective gives strong credence to this understanding.

Throughout the history of humanity's evolving cultures, the processes of natural selection have strongly favored groups of human beings that put the self-interest of their whole group ahead of the narrower self-interest of individuals in the group. Natural selection has also favored those groups that developed strong enough religious beliefs to strike fear of divine punishment into people's hearts, so that members of the group would obey moral codes consistent with the group's best interests.

Groups that cooperated together survived better than other groups in which too many individuals freeloadered or cheated or were not willing to sacrifice for the greater good of their clan. "Altruistic groups" had much better survival advantages than groups with too many narrowly selfish individuals.

--- *Revelations of a Modern Prophet*

Think about the Ten Commandments. Recognizing evolutionary evidence of the central role that group selection has played in human development, one can see a broad utility underlying the Ten Commandments. Of course, the first four commandments are obsessed with *obedience* to biblical beliefs, and contain a divine threat that, for those who do not believe and obey, they will be consigned to a terrible fate in a hellish place for all of eternity. Not only that, but the jealous Lord Almighty will punish the children of those who disobey "Him" to the third and fourth generation for their failure to conform to this belief system. But the other six Commandments, in revealing contrast, are basic codes of Golden Rule morality, ethical reciprocity and peaceable coexistence within groups. Taken all together, such commandments help assure the prospering and survival of the group itself.

Ideas consonant with this grand conception infuse these common sense writings, and I'm hopeful that readers will join me in a crusade to make our world a much better one for humanity as a whole, today and tomorrow.

Abraham Lincoln once stated early in his life that his greatest ambition was to be truly esteemed by his fellow men, and to deserve this high regard by rendering himself worthy of their esteem. That is noble and worthy leadership. Today, one might think that the greatest ambition of most of our partisan political representatives is of a much meaner and more myopic set of driving forces, especially by unprincipled conservatives.

Abraham Lincoln once said (paraphrased): "The task of our forefathers was to uprear upon the hills and valleys of our land a political edifice of liberty and equal rights, and it is ours to transmit these undecayed by the lapse of time and untorn by usurpation to the next generation. This task is imperatively required of us to faithfully perform in gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general."

The ties between people in "in-groups" of our ancestors morphed over the ages from commitments to clans to broader commitments and concerns for the best interests of increasingly large groups. Social developments made it more advantageous for early peoples to expand commitments from clans to tribes and then to agrarian communities, then to villages and towns, and cities, and city-states, and then entire nations. Each expansion in inclusiveness led to positive developments for our kind, like the auspicious boons integral to social cohesion

The next logical and moral step in our evolution is toward greater international collaboration and more effective international laws. And beyond that, the ethical nature of our commitments needs to be expanded to another even larger group: all our descendants in future generations. I encourage readers to peruse and give support to the proposed Bill of Rights for Future Generations in this Common Sense Revival, in dawning light of these ideas.

In his article *The Evolutionary Significance of Religion: Multi-Level Selection*, Michael Dowd explored the latest ideas about natural selection on multiple levels, not just in individuals. He stated that these evolving ideas have "enormous practical implications for how economic, social, and political leaders attempt to solve civilization-scale problems." Books like *The Social Conquest of Earth* by Edward O. Wilson, and *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, and *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism and Shame* all make the case that the concept of group selection is needed to explain human morality.

Michael Dowd added: "Religion has historically been a profoundly important adaptive feature. Without it, group cohesiveness and the motivation of individuals to die for their tribe or state or nation would likely never have emerged from the palette of instincts that we inherited from our pre-human ancestors. And without that kind of motivation, a group would not be able to defend itself against the incursions of neighboring (or long-distance conquering) cultures."

"It is vital to remember that religion is about *right relationship to reality*, not the supernatural," observed Michael Dowd. He further pointed out that a noted philosopher of religion named Loyal Rue tells us that *religion is not actually about God*. Loyal Rue wrote: "The most profound insight in the history of humankind is that we should seek to live in accord with reality. Indeed, living in harmony with reality may be accepted as a formal definition of wisdom. If we live at odds with reality (foolishly), then we will be doomed, but if live in right relationship with reality (wisely), then we shall be saved. Humans everywhere, and at all times, have had at least a tacit understanding of this fundamental principle. What we are less in agreement about is how we should think about reality and what we should do to bring ourselves into harmony with it."

Dowd continued: "Just because pre-scientific manifestations of religion necessarily posited supernatural beings and forces does not mean that religions of today and tomorrow need do so." Since religions provide overarching worldviews that attempt to answer questions of meaning, they provide guidance and "personal wholeness" and "social coherence." And, for the greater good, this guidance surely should become more expansive!

Dowd concluded that he is grateful for the evolutionary role that atheists and agnostics are playing "in helping (nay, forcing) our stodgy old (all-too-often dysfunctional) religions to catch up with the wealth of knowledge that science now offers."

Lord, let me be the person my dog thinks I am.

Note: No "stable genius" "moron" or any of his cultish trust-betraying loyalists could persuade me that denying important scientific understandings and violating precautionary principles is the right course of action. OR that it's okay to look the other way when seeing our representatives pursue policies and priorities that are blindered, treacherously socially irresponsible or overly short-term-oriented. Those corroded qualities are good for nothing other than a rueful laugh -- and being spurred on toward corrective action.

"Surely, perversely twisted distortions of reality that are made by the Trumpster for his own malicious narcissistic self-gain are odious and anti-social."

"Irreverence is the champion of liberty, and its only sure defense."

--- Mark Twain

Thinking about Good Acts and a Just Society

Mankind is an eternal seeker of reward, even for doing good. People feel that there ought to be some greater recompense for doing good than just a clear conscience or a feeling of righteousness, and they expect a kind of "pleasure" for making moral choices or taking ethical actions. This pleasure may be one of community esteem or gratitude, or a self-interested hope of receiving something good in return, or a feeling of freedom from a sense of

guilt. Many God-fearing religious people do good acts in hopes of gaining an eternally pleasant afterlife for themselves, or to avoid an imagined divine damnation.

While almost every person would say they believe people should do good and help remedy glaring injustices, few of us do all the good that we could. This is one of the deep contradictions of human nature. John Fowles, in his thought-provoking philosophical treatise *The Aristos*, considered this issue, noting: "For the last two and a half millennia almost every great thinker, every great saint, and every great artist has advocated, personified and celebrated -- or at least implied -- the nobility and excellence of the good act as the basis of the just society."

If we were to structure our societies so that incentives for doing good were more attractive, then more good would result. We all face a multitude of anxieties in life, from fundamental universal anxieties to a variety of individual anxieties. Since all share these anxieties, to some extent, the hygienic emotion of empathy should have the effect of uniting us rather than isolating us. Instead, we tend to let nefarious schemers divide us, and master manipulators zealously try to gain benefits through divide-to-conquer ruses. As a result, as John Fowles explains, it is "as if the citizens of a country would defend it by each barricading himself in his own house."

Compassionate kindness to others, and actions against injustice and inequality, are crucially important, so they should be regarded as equivalent to *functional acts of hygiene*, not merely as acts done to bring hoped-for recompense. In *The Aristos*, John Fowles provides an excellent concise summary of his personal perspectives on big ideas in life, and expressed this convincing opinion: "As soon as we treat pleasure as a kind of successful bet, and then expect this sort of pleasure from moral choices and actions, we are in trouble." He clarifies that the main problem with such an attitude is that we may reach the conclusion: "only good actions that promise pleasure or personal rewards are worth our doing."

The intentions that motivate good actions should be a broader desire to institute more freedom and fairness for all -- i.e., more justice and equality. Otherwise, actions can turn out to be consequentially amoral or socially immoral. John Fowles also states that there is a "sadly wide category where actions may seem good to the person performing the action, but are clearly evil in their effects."

Despite the broad consensus on the desirability of people to do good for the greater good of all, most people seem to see "a perverse but deeper truth: it is better generally to do nothing than generally to do good." John Fowles adduces many reasons for this contradiction in purposes. We are not only seekers of the spiritually sublime, but we are also eternal seekers of rewards for ourselves. We expect some sort of compensation for doing good, and more than just a clear conscience or a feeling of righteous self-approval. We seek the hope of benefits in return, or wealth, or appreciated recognition, or personal gratitude, or community esteem. Or we seek to assuage a sense of guilt. John Fowles lists the main causes he sees for people's failure to do good:

- there is uncertainty as to what the outcome of one's actions may really be;
- there is a perception that the action contemplated is so small relative to the final intention that the action seems pointless;
- a conflict exists between do-good intentions and more narrowly selfish ends;
- a fatalistic belief is felt that it's only an illusion that we have freedom of choice in action;
- profoundly confusing complexities exist in the nature of understanding;
- our opposition may give 'counter-support' to what is opposed;
- it seems futile to oppose relativistic "evils".

In writing about the failure of most people to contribute to the greater good, Fowles attributes "this strange and irrational apathy" to religion-engendered myths that imply that doing good will bring us eternal pleasure in an afterlife, "and that thus the good man is happier than the bad. The world around us is full of evidence that these are indeed myths: good men are very often far less happy than bad ones, and good actions very often bring nothing but pain." He adds: "Over the last two hundred years there has been a great improvement in personal and public hygiene and cleanliness; and this was largely brought about by persuading people that the results of being dirty and apathetic in the face of disease were not acts of God, but preventable acts of nature; not the sheer misery in

things, but the controllable mechanisms of life." ... "We have had the first, the physical, phase of the hygienic revolution; it is time we went to the barricades for the second, the mental."

We can't shelter in place in inertia, backwardness, anti-adaptive rigidity, cultivated antipathy or the harsh hegemony of a dominion of vested interests and white male patriarchy over the common good.

Illusions of "Fiscal Conservatives"

Republicans have repeatedly tried to portray themselves as *fiscally conservative*. Really? They sure did not act as fiscal conservatives when they supported George W. Bush's tax cuts financed by trillions of dollars of borrowed money. They were NOT fiscally conservative when they enacted the Prescription Drug Act of 2003 that supercharged Big Pharma profits -- at the cost of increasing national debt obligations by more than \$1 trillion. And they certainly were not acting like fiscal conservatives when they consistently supported debt-financed wars and poorly-controlled military spending. Yes, total spending by the federal government has increased faster during administrations of Republican presidents than during ones of Democrats, so attempts to deceive the American people into thinking that Republicans are fiscal conservatives make them appear distinctly and ridiculously dishonest!

"You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time."

--- President Abraham Lincoln

There are other main features of Ronald Reagan's ideological revolution that Trump Republicans are emulating. They strive to eliminate regulations and undermine employee's power to collectively organize and bargain. By making extensive efforts to eliminate regulations on corporations, banks, hedge funds and other Wall Street entities, Reagan's ideological campaign contributed to a Savings and Loan crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this costly economic calamity, more than 1,000 Savings and Loan Associations failed.

Similar deregulatory actions negatively contributed to a much more expensive credit crisis and recession that began in late 2008. These "laissez-faire" policies and the economic bubble wreaked havoc on the economy and caused a widespread spike in unemployment and home foreclosures. Enormous bailouts were necessitated as a result, and the Federal Reserve and central banks worldwide were forced to desperately inject many trillions of dollars in liquidity into the banking system. One of the unintended consequences of such policies is that a record number of people in the United States are living below the poverty line, and in the awful throes of the pandemic, things have gone south at an alarming rate. We rightly should Build Back Better.

Conservatives appear to live in an "intellectual bubble." They often get their information from Trump spin, Fox News or right-wing talk radio, like the program of now deceased Rush Limbaugh, for decades), and they seem to be easily swayed by all the policy analysis they are repetitiously fed from billionaire-financed far-right think tanks. They appear to be generally unaware of contrary evidence, and oblivious to how their opinions, attitudes and stoked fears sound to outsiders -- or to how others are negatively affected. With the advent of Trump, things went from bad to much worse.

"Sometimes I wonder whether the world is being run by smart people who are putting us on, or by imbeciles who really mean it."

--- Mark Twain

Dante, in *Convivio*, wrote "And what else, day after day, endangers and destroys cities, regions, individuals so much as yet another amassing of wealth by someone. This very amassing releases further desires, which cannot be satisfied without someone paying the price."

Republican Dwight Eisenhower wrote a letter in 1954 that addressed the need for what he called "moderation" in government. He made this cogent observation: "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security and unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. ... Their number is negligible and they are stupid." Weigh in, Tucker Carlson!

Rhapsody in Blue

Republicans rhapsodize with vaulting rhetoric about American Exceptionalism, but their bait-and-switch policies prioritize exceptionally generous deals for top income earners in the U.S. while imposing relatively stingy deals on everyone else. They claim to represent "a shining city on a hill", but their blurry vision can be seen more accurately to resemble a glaring searchlight atop fortress walls that is blinding many Americans so that they will be deluded into opposing common sense solutions to our society's numerous solvable problems.

In addition to their overarching goal of cutting taxes for people who are already wealthy, their goal of imposing a more reactionary form of right-wing social engineering upon the American people -- especially on women! -- is anathema to our national ideals. The American people value both liberty and religious freedom, and they dislike abuses of authority. A provocative quote often misattributed to Sinclair Lewis in his novel about repressive totalitarianism, *It Can't Happen Here*, provides a disconcerting perspective: "When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag, carrying the cross."

President Biden denounced "MAGA Republicans" in late August 2022, when he said, "They're a threat to our very democracy. They refuse to accept the will of the people. They embrace political violence. They don't believe in democracy." The same day, he accused them of moving toward "semi-fascism."

A week later, Biden spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, stating that "too much of what's happening in our country today is not normal," and naming Trump and his followers as culpable. He added, "We do ourselves no favors to pretend otherwise." Biden was trying to capitalize on a controversial policy plan released by Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) earlier this year that called for expiration dates for all federal laws, which the president noted would include those establishing Social Security and Medicare.

"In the United States, former president Donald Trump has presumptively rejected future election results, and a majority of Republican candidates on the ballot this fall for major state and federal elective offices have joined him in repudiating the outcome of the 2020 presidential election — an epidemic of election denialism in the United States that historians and political scientists define as a core element in any country's drift toward authoritarian rule, writes Marc Fisher in *Leaders of democracies increasingly echo Putin in authoritarian tilt -- From Italy to Brazil to the United States, political leaders increasingly are echoing Russian President Vladimir Putin and one another by embracing far-right authoritarianism.*

"Recent years have brought a sharp reaction in many parts of the world, as globalization, political polarization, the rise of social media and a collapse of trust in major institutions have left many people feeling betrayed by their governments, torn apart from their careers and alone in their communities, according to historians, political scientists and sociologists who have studied these shifts in the world's economies and governments.

The result has been a similar quest for nationalist solutions in country after country, and a growing bond among the far-right autocrats in those places. For example, Hungary's prime minister, Victor Orban, and Italy's new prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, have spoken to acclaim at gatherings of the Conservative Political Action Coalition — a group that has helped propel Trump's movement in the United States.

"The trend we are seeing reflects a disillusionment around the world that the democratic process fails to produce effective, charismatic leaders," said Nikolas Gvosdev, a professor of national security studies at the U.S. Naval War College. "In country after country, the idea spreads that we need strong leaders who get things done. And it's not just in politics: We see the valorization of tech CEOs like Elon Musk as problem solvers who get the job done."

On Fascism

An incisive three-frame political cartoon shows a maniacal Donald Trump wearing a "F YOUR FEELINGS" button and shouting "DEMOCRATS ARE COMMUNISTS! SOCIALISTS! CROOKS! LIARS! AUTHORITARIANS! THUGS! 2020 WAS STOLEN! STORM THE CAPITOL!"

In the second frame, a distraught Joe Biden is observing, "MAGA REPUBLICANS ARE SEMI-FASCISTS." And in the third frame, a stressed out elephant with a silk hanky is saying, "... OH MY WORD! HEAVEN FORFEND! GOODNESS GRACIOUS ME! SUCH LANGUAGE FROM PRESIDENT BIDEN!"

That is an appropriate cartoon, because the most pronounced strength of MAGA Republicans is to cunningly pretend to be the victim, twist the truth, deny reality, hijack emotions, shout to high heavens, weaponize resentments, amplify grievances, blame moderates and liberals, bully people, force their oppressive policies on others, pretend to be occupying the moral high ground -- and demand dominating influence, power and control over everyone else.

The Republican Party can be boiled down to one truth. They are the party that doesn't want to be told what to do ("Don't Tread on Me"), yet wants to tell everyone else what to do, especially on issues of reproductive rights, LGBTQ human rights, and their opposition to gun safety measures. "When you think about everything that they do in this context it makes sense. Their hypocrisy is completely logical to them. If you're part of one of their groups, conservative, white, Christian you're in. But membership means you need to be all in, or you're a RINO."

MAGA followers are definitely acting in ways that President recently described as "almost like semi-fascism". Republican voters have spent months nominating MAGA extremists who are hell-bent on continuing the crude onslaught of hateful rhetoric against LGBTQ+ people, attacking public schools, undermining our democracy, and imposing draconian abortion restrictions. All of these reactionary plans are massively unpopular, which means we have to spend every day of the next two months letting the public know exactly what's at stake.

Republicans have weaponized divide-to-conquer tactics from the Demagogues Playbook by demonizing and dehumanizing progressives and liberals, painting them as radicals and communists and unpatriotic socialists, and trying to deceive voters into not seeing how extremist the MAGA Republican Party has become in its monomaniacal pursuit of domineering power no matter what the cost or consequences.

Making matters drastically worse, Republicans have managed to capture the Supreme Court and many federal courts by stacking them with far right conservatives. Ominously, philosopher Jason Stanley of Yale University, who is best known for his 2018 book *How Fascism Works*, recently tweeted: "Once you have the courts you can pretty much do whatever you want."

For a good understanding of this court capture scheme and its consequences, see my essay *Calamitous Consequences of Success of a Secret Conspiratorial Scheme to Capture the Courts*.

Curiously, conservative evangelical voters and those who manifest *Don't Tread on Me* Tea Party attitudes have been duped into supporting the narrow Republican agenda. How was that achieved, again? Through divisive tactics, deceptive arguments, arrogantly uncompromising stances, hyping-up extreme partisanship, blaming and demonizing others, preying on people's fears, slickly promoting rigidly narrow doctrines, and making effective uses of shrewd framing. The corporate-controlled mainstream media supports this offensive by pushing devious distorting spin, particularly on Fox News and other even further right and more extreme outlets like OAN and Breitbart and various nefarious social media sites. Confident and simplistic proclamations by Republican politicians have been used to fool many Americans into accepting trickle-down deceptions and on-your-own-economic plans and bad provisions in international trade deals. Mitt Romney pretended in the weeks before the 2012 election that he was primarily concerned about the middle class, but his plans had the same goal as George W. Bush's: to enrich millionaires and billionaires at the expense of everyone else. And so it has come to pass that Trump Republicans utilize the same pathological tactics.

Examining the National Debt

The U.S. national debt was just under \$20 trillion when Trump took office in January 2017, and it reached \$28 trillion soon after he lost the 2020 election and was required to leave office. Today, in mid-May 2024, the national debt stands at \$34.7 trillion. This debt now represents more than \$100,000 for every man, woman and child in the United States. This huge amount of debt is undermining the potential well-being and prospects of people in the future. We can no longer afford to allow the all-but-criminal evasion of taxes by rich people that has contributed to this unprecedented level of debt.

We should be clear about the starkly wrongheaded nature of the swindle that allows huge sums of money to be borrowed to finance low tax rates for the rich. Consider one compelling reason why. Even if not a penny of the principal balance of borrowed money is ever paid back, every taxpayer in every future year will be forced to contribute to paying the interest on this woe-begotten debt. The interest cost on borrowed money amounts to

100% of the amount borrowed every 18 years, assuming a long-term average interest rate of only 4%, and this compounds when no payments are made on the principal. It is completely crazy to borrow trillions of dollars to give it to rich people today, knowing that the boon to wealthy people and their heirs will cost people in the future 100% of the amount borrowed every 18 years or so, over and over and over again. It is malfeasance for any of our representatives to be accomplices to this scam.

I call on all our American leaders to come together to help enact a Fair Taxation Initiative like the one proposed in *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*. This change would make our economy fairer and healthier, and allow us to invest more sensibly in national infrastructure maintenance and improvements, and healthier communities, and vital protections of natural ecosystems. The American people would be more secure, the size of future deficits would be reduced, and our democracy would be made stronger and more resilient.

Recognizing how outrageous it is that the productivity of American workers has roughly doubled in the past few decades while their average hourly compensation has increased very little, we must demand a better deal. One outcome of this situation is that wages are at their lowest share of GDP on record, while the profit margins corporations are making are at the highest level ever. Meanwhile, total taxes paid by corporations as a percent of GDP are the lowest in decades. These facts reflect highly unfair trends that should be reversed through sensible public policies. Otherwise, the pressure cooker of inequities will cause increasing adversities for the vast majority of the American people.

A Surprising but Relevant Factor in Considerations of Fairness

Here is a pragmatic perspective that should be like a transcendent epiphany to fair-minded policy makers and utilitarian philosophers. As mentioned in the Introduction to *Common Sense Revival*, it turns out that when people earn an annual income of \$50,000 to \$75,000, they feel happier than others who earn less money. In surprising counterpoint, however, people who earn more than \$75,000 per year are not especially any happier. Here is a powerful reason why we should prevent rich people from grabbing the preponderance of the benefits of our economic system for themselves, and stop allowing them to monopolize the nation's wealth. And here is a convincing reason why we should make our national system of taxation more progressively equitable by structuring it to be more steeply graduated.

This insight leads to proposals to resist the influence of high-income earners to get lower tax rates on the highest levels of their incomes through the expedient tactic of borrowing money from the public treasury.

A more steeply graduated tax system would facilitate the improvement in the overall level of well-being in these United States, and it would ensure that the vast majority of people would have a better chance of being able to succeed in their pursuit of health and happiness. Progressive taxation is one of the fairest ideas ever devised because of the fact that the same rate of tax is assessed on every taxpayer for every dollar that anyone earns, with higher rates of tax being assessed on higher categories of income.

Politicians on the political right have a pathetic propensity for coming up with shrewd rationalizations for plans that unjustly shift the tax burden from high-income earners to everyone else. Notably and consequentially, the tax rate on the richest 400 Americans has been reduced by two-thirds since the early 1960s, while the overall tax rate on the average worker has nearly doubled. Shocking! It is amazing that we haven't had a revolution with so significant an increase in this level of inequality and injustice! It is even more outrageous and irresponsible that this trend has caused a shift of obligations and hardships from people today to all people in the future. And Trump Republicans have drastically compounded this injustice.

Let's intelligently implement fairer tax policies that will alleviate the sense of guilt that all rich people should feel because of the unfairness of status quo policies that excessively benefit vested interests!

Insidiously stealthy strategies like Tax Cut swindles create a big risk to the entire international economy and the well-being of billions of people around the globe, so we should be willing "to think outside the box", and find ways to create a safer, fairer and more stable global economy. One way to do this would be to seek restitution from wealthy people who have abused the power of the influence of their money to gain an ever-larger share of the wealth created in our capitalist economy. This restitution would be sensibly required from those who have rigged

the system by engineering our national policies to their (unaffordably) narrow advantages.

This leads to an important idea. To reduce the probability of a severe economic calamity caused by excessive and irresponsibly generated debt, and to thus forestall related social turmoil, we need to take extraordinary measures. The status quo is no longer acceptable; more eminently fair measures are necessary. One emphasis of these measures should be to dramatically reduce inequality in our society, and mitigate the terribly spiking gap between the fortunate and the unfortunate in the world right now. And we should do so in greener ways.

A simple restitution proposal is contained below that would dramatically reduce inequalities and the risks of a severe debt crisis. This proposal would make our societies substantially fairer, and would do so with a surprising minimum of economic hardship. Check it out! It is under the heading "A Shockingly Fair-Minded Plan", further on in this *Uncommon Sense and Fair-Mindedness* (see pages 106-108).

A popular gambit in the U.S. has been to use contested concepts of freedom and true economic well-being to justify low tax rates for people with the highest incomes. Quite often lost in translation is the fact that *social responsibility* is a necessary adjunct of individual freedom. An integral part of the "social contract" is that those people who have lots of money have a larger responsibility for helping make our society function better. They are, after all, the only people who can easily afford to finance crucially important investments in social safety net programs and the greater good for all.

One freedom that people with huge amounts of wealth and influence insistently proclaim is their right to take advantage of the existing rigged system at the expense of all others, even when their activities are achieved in ways that will be detrimental to our heirs in the future. The radically regressive changes in taxation that have been made since 1980 have had a cumulative effect of giving rich people an increasing monopoly on the nation's wealth. Monopolies are not good. We have to fix that! Too big to fail? Take action to fix it!

In Justin Trudeau's surprising victory in Canada's national elections in October 2015, he boldly advocated a more progressive tax plan designed to give tax breaks to people in the middle class and invest in infrastructure, and sensibly pay for this by assessing higher tax rates on high levels of income. That's a commendable plan!

Our nation's Founders honorably championed Enlightenment Era ideals of democratic fairness and equality, and reasonable opportunities for all to pursue happiness. They also advocated greater good goals as measured by the general welfare of the people. None of our Founders would have defended excessive power and influence by an oligarchic few. Not a single one of them would have favored giving huge advantages to the top 1% of the people, when such an action hurts the other 99%.

On the Topic of Restitution

Demand restitution and recompense from democracy-assaulting MAGA Republicans who are endangering our republic and corruptly abusing influence and power in Congress to such misguided extents. To start, demand five immediate concessions:

- (1) All of our representatives should help pass legislation that will re-empower the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to make voting rights fairer and prevent discriminatory restrictions on voting. This will be true integrity.
- (2) Pass legislation to restrict Big Money and Dark Money in elections and lobbying, essentially overturning the Supreme Court's wrongly-decided *Citizens United* ruling that has given moneyed interests such awfully domineering power and influence over government.
- (3) Pass legislation requiring the redistricting of all counties in every state in the U.S., using non-partisan redistricting commissions. Base the drawing of these fairer districts on the 2020 Census, and make them effective on January 1, 2024. This will have the doubly positive effect of eliminating unconscionably unfair gerrymanders and desirably serving to dramatically lessen the damaging extent of extreme polarization that is so harmfully allowing divide-to-conquer politicians to exert domineering control over the American people.
- (4) Pass legislation into federal law that will codify reasonable *Roe v. Wade* protections of women, guaranteeing every women the right to choose to have an abortion to terminate an unwanted pregnancy before fetal viability, and additionally give every woman and man who wants it easy access to contraception.
- (5) Pass the proposed Judiciary Act of 2022 to increase the number of Justices on the Supreme Court, and help

confirm four new Justices, to be nominated by President Biden in consultation with the American Bar Association and good faith collaboration with Republican moderates, so that the high court will be better balanced and less politically partisan.

To Be, or Not To Be: This Question Concerns Austerity

Any story that involves central characters with names like Rogoff and Reinhart has a good chance of being a juicy one. Since this story is a matter of fact, it's even better. Like good old Mark Twain once said, "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't."

A curious turning point in history took place in 2010 when the world was right in the middle of one of those periodic panicky economic cataclysms that characterize capitalist systems. World leaders had been more-or-less valiantly striving to combat the specter of a global depression in the wake of the credit crisis of late 2008, but suddenly they shifted their strategies to a struggle to control the explosion of debt that resulted from this crisis. What had caused this dramatic development? Why had concerted efforts to stimulate the economy suddenly given way to initiatives to impose austerity measures on people in the U.S. and in Europe? Who was manipulating the control mechanisms, Wizard of Oz-like, that drove these two countervailing strategies?

Mother Jones magazine provided a stunningly convincing perspective on this issue in a 2013 article titled *Death by a Thousand Cuts: Belt-Tightening Wasn't the Cure for Ailing Economy. It Was the Last Straw*. This article essentially concerned the misguided nature of austerity programs. It addressed an influential paper published in January 2010 in which Harvard economists Kenneth Rogoff and Carmen Reinhart claimed to have proved that when a nation's debt reaches 90% of its annual economic activity, this is a dangerous threshold. Throughout history, they contended, such a threshold has caused a slowing of economic growth. "As economic studies go, it was nothing short of a bombshell." The report had the effect of radically shifting the policies of many nations from efforts to cope with recession, joblessness and the aftermath of the severe credit crisis, to efforts aimed at reducing deficits. The Rogoff and Reinhart paper was a driving force behind this abandonment of economic stimulus programs and a shift to slashing government spending.

Ironically, an error in the Excel spreadsheet used in the Rogoff/Reinhart study was discovered two years later, when independent researchers found out that the study's findings had been derived by relying on what turned out to be a mistake in their evaluation. What this means is that one of the shoddy beliefs that anti-Obama conservatives clung to in their stubborn opposition to increases in the debt limit was found to be inaccurate.

The debt limit crisis that confronted the U.S. in October 2013 was a bizarre one. Conservative Republicans made a blustery stand against another increase in the national debt limit, even though it was the wrong time to try to insist on immediate efforts to balance the budget. If you buy a new car to get to work, or retain the services of a computer geek to fix your computer, you have made a commitment, and when the balance comes due on your credit card, that moment is the wrong time to refuse to pay the obligation!

After the financial crisis brought on by the bursting of the housing bubble led to a wider recession, "What was needed was for the federal government to apply the same urgency to rescuing the economy that it had to rescuing the banks." Most economists agree that stimulative government spending is needed during economic contractions, and during their immediate aftermath, to help the economy recover and resume growth. But then Republican politicians and other proponents of austerity measures argued, rather disingenuously and contrary to Keynesian understanding, that deficit spending hurts the economy, rather than actually stimulating it and helping it recover from a recession. Fast forward a few years, and political gamesmanship and the urgings of profiteers make Trump Republicans look extraordinarily hypocritical, like deeply dishonest operatives as they find merit in opening up the spigots to add to the spiking national debt in order to bail out the economy during the pandemic, on top of financing their regressive tax cuts. Of course, as soon as Joe Biden became president, the deficit hawks began to reassert themselves. In October, the debt-to-GDP ratio exceeds a high risk 130%.

Another Shift Arrives

There is vital value in understanding how a financial crisis came about, and what preventative lessons have been learned from it. But let's now pivot to a more important question: "What should we do now?"

The case is quite strong that what we need now is not austerity and extreme conservatism, but smart public investments and more progressive national policies. Key conflicts exist between the conservative agenda and the common good, and it is counterproductive for the overarching goal of conservative politicians in recent decades to have been to cut taxes and make elite-favoring changes in tax policies. Such plans have the undesirable effect of shifting the burden of taxes from high-income earners to everyone else in every future year.

I smile broadly. Why is it, I wonder rhetorically, that our great experiment in democracy has been corrupted by moneyed interests to such an extent that they have managed to get our representatives to champion the narrow interests of the richest folks to the detriment of positive actions consistent with the common good?

Most of the politicians who represent us say they are committed to principle; but unfortunately, their principles generally involve "figuring out new ways to funnel more federal money to the people who need it least." This observation, made by Gail Collins in a column titled *Missing the Bad Old Days*, concerned the practically malicious efforts by Republicans in 2013 to slash food stamp funding by \$39 billion in a renewal of the national farm bill while at the same time utterly ignoring the option of cutting huge crop insurance subsidies that the legislation contained for the benefit of powerful wealthy vested interests. "Bah, humbug!"

The Pope Weighs In

The world's oldest living thing is a 6,000-year-old Bristlecone Pine named *Crusader* that lives in harsh conditions at a remote high-elevation location in rugged mountains. The last time I visited, a mystical vibe emanated from this tree through interspeciesal extrasensory clairvoyance, telling me: "Grow slowly. Live in ways consistent with ecological realities. Be stoically persistent." Somehow I instantaneously knew this curious communiqué meant that it is a transcendent human obligation to cultivate an incisive awareness of the relative right found in broadly fairer national planning and policies, especially as viewed through a lens of the longer term greater good.

Pope Francis has repeatedly criticized the capitalist system. He once decried "the idolatry of money" and made a pointed attack on the deceitful ideology of trickle-down economics. He also bemoaned the fact that people have a "crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power." He was particularly critical in his words concerning ideological dogmas that assume economic growth is a sufficient top social goal, and that deny the overarching responsibility for governments to exercise an active role in humanizing market economies.

At the time, arch-conservative Rush Limbaugh jumped on the Pope's words, accusing him of advocating "pure Marxism." Why the rancor? Here the Pope was proposing broader and deeper truths, and the reactive leader of American "dittoheads" at the time was practically apoplectic with fervent conviction in promoting contrasting superficial untruths. Limbaugh, of course, was compensated exceedingly well for his maniacal propaganda, and he paid very low tax rates on his ill-gained windfall compensation, in accordance with the politically determined tax system that has its main emphasis on treating high-income earners to historically low rates of tax.

As some of the hard working, hard-drinking, hard-living, hardscrabble miners of the late 19th century in Wild West Colorado could have cautioned Rush Limbaugh, "To Hell You Ride." Some things just go gaily hand in hand!

Mainstream economic theories treat natural resources as a free good, as though they are provided at no cost, and as if waste and resource depletion are of no concern. These theories assume that perpetual growth and ever-rising consumption will be sustainable into the indefinite future. But the premise that economic growth automatically equals prosperity is absurd, especially given that growth in consumption does not give adequate consideration to associated environmental damages or the highly adverse implications of squandered resources and huge amounts of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. The idea is crazy that continuous growth is desirable, when understood in the context that finite natural resources simply can't support infinite growth. "This, of course, contradicts physics," declared Paul Craig Roberts, one of the founding theoreticians of supply-side economics. Roberts says that this is a "very stunning shortcoming" of modern "conservative" economics.

Even China, "the badboy of soaring economic growth and rapacious environmental destruction", is wising up by developing a companion metric to Gross Domestic Product that would measure the value of natural resources and healthy ecosystems. The states of Maryland and Vermont have actually adopted broad "Genuine Progress Indicators" to replace misleading Gross Domestic Product measures and take into account bigger picture concerns.

It is basically insane to continue pursuing the same national policies we have in the past. Confirming such an assertion, Stanford University ecologist Gretchen Daily validly pointed out that it is folly for humankind to be "driving natural capital to its lowest level ever in human history."

Economist Herman Daly provided an alternative plan, proposing a "steady state" economy for countries that have achieved material wealth. Using tools like new carbon taxes on fossil fuels, a cap would be instituted on production and consumption so that these activities would not exceed Earth's capacity to replenish and cleanse itself, and goals of higher consumption in such a system would be replaced by more salubrious goals of achieving a better quality of life. Economist Herbert Stein succinctly said: "If something can't go on forever, it won't."

Another Aspect of Social Justice

"Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

--- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Emergency room care is the most expensive medical care available. It is downright stupid to have a medical system in which tens of millions of people can get care only in emergency rooms. Doctors tell people that good primary care is the best way to stay healthy, and I strongly believe in the value of preventative health care and periodic medical check-ups, and a more pronounced emphasis on good nutrition programs and exercise rather than on prescription drugs and emergency treatments.

An estimated 45,000 people die every year because they don't have health insurance and thus are not able to obtain needed medical care, according to researchers at the Harvard Medical School. The system of healthcare in the U.S. is overly focused on profit making by health insurance companies and drug companies, instead of having a top concern of fairly providing for the health of American citizens. A mind-boggling total of \$3.8 trillion was spent on healthcare in 2019 (before the spike in medical costs due to the pandemic). Of the huge amount of money spent every year on healthcare, the Institute of Medicine noted that in 2009, about \$750 billion of that year's total spending was wasted on unneeded services, administrative inefficiencies and downright fraud. This was roughly 25% of total spending on healthcare. This is a system, the Institute compellingly stated, that has become "too complex and costly to continue business as usual."

This is not a good way to run a country. To obtusely stick with the system we have is foolhardy. It is crazy for conservatives to be indignant about the Affordable Care Act that President Obama spent great political capital to get enacted into law. Even Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, after all, reluctantly agreed the law is Constitutional, and in June 2015 the Court further agreed that subsidies for the underprivileged are fair. This legislation represents a reasonable beginning toward coping with the high costs of healthcare in our nation, and dealing with supreme inequities and discrimination against the tens of millions of persons with "pre-existing conditions". Nonetheless Republican politicians and judges are making treacherous efforts to overturn the law.

Vastly better reforms are possible. A real good one is proposed in *Radically Simple Ways to Make America Fairer, and to Fix Both Social Security and Health Care So We Can Move On to Address Much Bigger Issues*.

Donald Trump created his own variety of political capital through sheer force of his demagoguery, egomaniacal greed and manipulative bullying. He is a malignant narcissist cult leader, a Trojan Horse for treachery, a con man who demands loyalty to himself, and maliciously uses intimidation to force others to make Faustian bargains.

The 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney notably made a glaring flip-flop on healthcare issues during his run for the presidency. When running for the Senate in 1994, he had declared support for universal healthcare, and had actually charged that having millions of people get "free care" from emergency rooms is "a form of socialism." Then, as Governor of Massachusetts in 2006, he laudably helped put a universal healthcare plan into effect in that state. In absurd contrast, he attacked the Affordable Care Act during his failed 2012 presidential campaign, even though this national plan was modeled on his own plan in Massachusetts. He even said that emergency room care is sufficient for the uninsured as their only form of healthcare. But the current system is extremely expensive, radically unjust and unwisely impractical -- and a very odd form of socialism!

Romney's flip-flops on healthcare are another of many instances of Republican politicians being opportunistically opposed to policies they had once advocated. One of their main motives for such opposition was to undermine

President Obama. This obstruction of equitable compromise and bipartisan consensus-seeking and improved healthcare has characterized politics ever since the day President Obama first took the oath of office.

Here is yet another good reason for our representatives to work together for the common good. We need to seek a more reasonable agreement on how to solve problems, and give strong support to fair-minded people who are trying to improve our society! An insult hurling and character assassinating Donald Trump, who favors more advantages for rich people while deceiving people about this fact, was the wrong person to achieve this goal.

Economic Conundrums

A global financial crisis was precipitated in late 2008, after the investment bank Lehman Brothers suddenly went into bankruptcy. This urgent crisis made one thing obvious: that bankers had taken many risks that contributed to bringing the entire global economy down. Their actions forced governments worldwide to come to the rescue, with eager lobbying by inadequately regulated "too-big-to-fail" financial institutions. These bailouts cost trillions of dollars. It is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of this cost and the ramifications of having spent so much money to bail out the economy by rewarding those complicit in having manufactured the crisis.

Even worse, the reforms undertaken in the wake of this crisis have not been adequate to reduce the risks of a repeat of this hyper-costly outcome. The banking industry has gotten even more highly concentrated, and entrenched interest groups have prevented the enactment of reasonable reforms or effective regulations, or of better oversight of risk-laden financial derivatives.

When banks and Wall Street entities become too big to fail, the average American on Main Street effectively becomes too small to matter. This outcome is too socially detrimental to accept!

A close look at our economic and political system shows that this crisis was NOT a mere accident. Specific incentives encouraged bankers to take excessive risks. "By the way, we have to fix that," as President Obama said, when referring to a different issue concerning reprehensible Republican efforts to deprive poor people and minorities and students of their rights to vote. That issue involved concerted attempts to deny millions of underprivileged people fair representation of their best interests. It's stunning that so many people are forced to wait in absurdly long lines for hours and hours to cast their votes on Election Day. We should rightly fix that -- especially since in-person voting has become hazardous in the pandemic!

All these developments together are putting our democratic system of governance in peril. These are just a few of the troublesome facets of our dysfunctional political system, and of our merciless Shock Doctrine Disaster Capitalist economic system.

Consider the fact that no one has been held accountable for having caused the financial crisis that began with the bursting of the real estate bubble in 2008. "If no individual can be blamed for what has happened, it means that the problem lies in the economic and political system," writes Joseph Stiglitz. In effect, the wealthiest 2% of Americans have gotten away with the biggest heist in world history in the last 40 years. They have managed this scam by abusing the power of their Big Money influence to get Ronald Reagan to reduce top tax rates from 70% in 1980 to 28% by 1988. This radical reduction was not merely a tinkering with the tax code. And since then, amazingly, marginal tax rates on the highest incomes have been kept very low -- they were an inadequate rate of 35% from 2001 through the end of 2012. We can no longer afford this generosity!

A good plan for remedying this situation is proposed in the Fair Taxation Initiative contained in *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*. I recommend a Salon-wise top tax rate increase to 48%.

Big Picture Economics and the Reboot Hypothesis

The study known as macroeconomics was brought into being in 1936 with the publication of *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* by John Maynard Keynes (pronounced 'caines'). This discipline was a big picture intellectual response to the widespread adversities caused by the calamitous Depression of the 1930s. The term *macroeconomics* initially referred to knowledge and expertise accumulated in hopes of understanding the causes of the Depression, so that a recurrence of that calamity could be prevented. Enough had been learned of what causes economic downturns that another depression was averted in the 1970s when a strong recovery was engineered

after the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent recession.

Unfortunately, economists and politicians and ideologues then chose to forget what had been learned in the Depression. They repealed sensible banking legislation like the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act that had separated the safety of depository banks from the risk-taking of investment banks. Parts of the New Deal were undermined, and once again economic bubbles were stoked and regressive changes in taxation were implemented, and high levels of deficit spending began and continued, year after year after year.

Many people have experienced their computer or iPhone getting so messed up that the best thing to do is to reboot it. Recognizing how messed up our economic and political systems are, and how deeply moneyed interests have corrupted them, it sure seems like we should take bold steps to reboot. Thom Hartmann sagely stated in *Rebooting the American Dream: Eleven Ways to Rebuild Our Country*: "The solutions can be found by going back to the operating system designed by our Founding Fathers, and refined by both Democrats and Republicans -- until a virus called Reaganomics began to damage it, and subsequent attacks under both Bushes and even Clinton weakened it further."

Thom Hartmann cogently expresses the opinion that we should reboot "to restore an America beset by problems like joblessness, declining wages, huge discrepancies in wealth, political corruption, environmental degradation, and corporate malfeasance." It is eminently reasonable to agree with this assessment, for high unemployment rates cause working people to be more insecure, and this in turn makes them more desperately willing to put up with more indignities than they would otherwise. They are basically compelled to go along with the rigged status quo, no matter how distressing. Insecurity has the insidious effect of forcing many workers to play a passive role in the serious game of Charades that accompanies the titanic struggle between Capital and Labor, which has a long, sordid and sometimes violent history. This is a real story like the one of David versus Goliath.

"It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!"

--- Upton Sinclair

Relatively high joblessness represents a type of two-for-the-price-of-one bargain for big businesses. They get effective wage cost constraints, AND they get employees who are insecure, intimidated and compliant. Slick operators profit handsomely from the outcome, especially banking executives, financiers, CEOs, corporate lawyers, politicians, investors and rich "conservatives", all of whom are instrumental in having engineered boom-and-bust cycles in the first place.

"Most working people are more concerned with making a living than with making history."

--- Paul Wellstone (paraphrased)

When one honestly "follows the money", it becomes obvious that giant corporations and their beneficiaries have managed to shift advantages much more heavily in their favor since 1980 in this hard-fought contest between Capital and Labor. It is high time we give underdogs better opportunities and fairer protections! Capitalists are especially successful in grabbing advantages and market share and government largess during economic shocks, as Naomi Klein makes clear in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.

A salient point to remember in all discussions about national finances is that corporations, by hook or by crook, have managed to reduce the total share of federal tax revenues they pay from 40% of the total in the 1940s to an average of about 25% in the 1960s to less than 10% today. The direct consequence of this "success" is that the burden of taxation has been shifted to all other taxpayers -- and everyone in the future. Pay-as-we-go? That fiscally conservative notion seems to have become anathema to powerful interests, especially Republicans!

Economic issues are examined in greater detail throughout this *Common Sense Revival*. You will find my most important suggestions for improving our world in *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*. Other essays like *Existence, Economics and Ecological Intelligence* online (and in Book Three of this manifesto) provide additional valuable insights and recommendations.

[Is America the Greatest Country in the World?](#)

I love our nation. But I do so liberally, not blindly. Think about a widely seen scene in the excellent program on HBO, *The Newsroom*, some years ago. A student asked news anchor Will McAvoy, a character played by Jeff Daniels, "Why is America the greatest country in the world?" His cogent response was that America is not "so star-spangled awesome":

"There is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world. We're seventh in literacy, twenty-seventh in math, twenty-second in science, forty-ninth in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, third in median household income, number four in labor force, and number four in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: number of citizens per capita that are incarcerated, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined, twenty-five of whom are allies." After a poignant pause, McAvoy continued:

"We sure used to be. We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons and we passed laws and struck down laws for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chest. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, acted like men. And we aspired to intelligence; we didn't belittle it; it didn't make us feel inferior. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election, and we didn't scare so easy. We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men, men who were revered. The first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one. America is not the greatest country in the world anymore."

More recently, Jeff Daniels declared that "Democracy is at stake" due to vital values being undermined -- values of honesty, decency, civility, compassion, respect for the rights of others, and fair protections for the American people against the relentless predations of domineering corporations and the wealthy.

The Critical Importance of an Independent and Investigative Press

A map showing the status of "Freedom of the Press" in every country in the world came to me from *Upworthy*. This Map of the World showed every nation in a color-coded synopsis that revealed relative freedom of the press allowed to its citizens. Canada, Germany and Scandanavian countries are shown in white, salubriously meaning "Good situation"; the United States, Australia and most of Western Europe enjoy a "Satisfactory situation." India, Italy, and much of Eastern Europe and South America have "Noticeable problems", and Mexico and Russia are coded red for "Difficult situation". Onerously, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Somalia and Cuba suffer a "Very Serious situation". The terrorist shootings at the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015 made it obvious that governments in Islamic nations must help marginalize violent extremists who oppose freedoms of the press and freedoms of religious beliefs.

Seeing this comprehensive summary of freedom of the press around the world, it becomes clear that most countries should strive to improve their ranking in this measure of fair governance. Greater freedoms of the press, and of protections for whistleblowers, are important because when these things are curtailed, then governments can more easily impose other oppressive measures on a populace, like restrictions on freedoms of speech and religious belief, and regressive changes in tax policies, and incursions against liberties and individual rights like those guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. The Trump administration not only threatened freedoms of expression in the United States, but also seriously undermined oversight, transparency and accountability.

Nelson Mandela put it clearly and succinctly: "A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy." In outrageous contrast, Donald Trump stated as a candidate that he would counter criticism by journalists and newspaper editorials by changing libel laws in a way that would undermine the first amendment and the freedom of the press. He declared: "One of the things I'm gonna do, and this is only gonna make it tougher for me, and I've never said this before, but one of the things I'm gonna do if I win ... is I'm gonna open up our libel laws so when they write purposely negative and horrible and false articles, we can sue them and win lots of money." ... "With me, they're not protected, because I'm not like other people ... We're gonna open up those libel laws, folks, and we're gonna have people sue you like you never get sued before."

It's interesting that Trump thinks he's not like other people in this regard. In actuality, the U.S. Constitution says he is exactly like other people, because under the Constitution, all American citizens are supposedly equal under the law. "There is no Donald Trump Exception clause anywhere to be found. Even the Founding Fathers had to take their lumps from their critics. But we get where he is coming from -- the political milieu of fascism. Fascist dictators -- even wannabe fascist dictators -- cannot abide criticism."

Absolute authoritarian wannabe Trump hates criticism and frequently mocks and attacks the media. He is like the demagogue Joseph McCarthy, a Republican senator from Wisconsin who corrupted political discourse in the early 1950s during his first term in office by using falsehoods and innuendo to inflame public fears of communism, and ruthlessly manipulating people's emotions. He was brought down because Edward R. Murrow, a courageous journalist, understood that a bully like McCarthy could not be dealt with by traditional reporting.

Nancy Conway observed that "Our democracy relies on an informed citizenry. Thoughtful, fair, balanced, comprehensive reporting in print and in photos or video may be the best way to know what's going on -- the way to best inform ourselves. Information is what keeps us free from tyranny." In sharp contrast to this idea, misinformation can torpedo our ship of state.

The Value of Freedom of the Press

"Time and again, we have seen power-hungry leaders of other countries chip away at the freedom and independence of the press, threatening their citizens' access to critical information. These democratically elected leaders know that they must neutralize or co-opt the press to eliminate a check on the government and pave the way for them to increase their power and cause their countries to 'back-slide' into autocratic regimes. These leaders also know that the suppression of the press and the transformation from democracy to autocracy does not occur overnight. Rather, these democratically elected leaders follow a 'playbook' pursuant to which they slowly and methodically (1) undermine the public's trust in the press, (2) block access to press organizations viewed as critical of the regime, (3) harm the interests of the owners of disfavored press organizations, and (4) punish or otherwise censor disfavored journalists and press organizations. History shows that when democratic leaders employ this playbook in a systematic effort to control the press, their countries do not remain democracies for long."

"President Trump's repeated deployment of government power against the press -- unprecedented in modern times in this country -- replicates the playbook used by strong-man leaders and their allies in Hungary, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and elsewhere to erode the democratic institutions in those countries." Trump has followed this playbook of authoritarian actions, waging war against the media's credibility (declaring it "fake news"), calling independent press "the enemy of the people", and blocking access of critical outlets and journalists and attacking businesses like AT&T and Amazon, and threatening or punishing media outlets.

"Trump's reaction on Twitter to the New York Times story detailing more than \$1 billion of losses he claimed on his tax returns in the 1980s and '90s was illuminating. Flip-flopping like a beached trout, Trump first dismissed the story as something everyone has known for ages -- 'very old information' -- then boasted that all great real estate developers dodged taxes in those days -- 'it was sport' -- before dismissing the whole thing as a 'Fake News hit job!' He confirmed it, explained it, bragged about it and denied it in the space of a couple of tweets."

Democrats have trouble remembering the two rules of Trump. First, he thrives on conflict. He reportedly told senior aides from the start that every day of his presidency should be a TV show in which he battles rivals and wins. Second, he believes that elections are won by dominating the spotlight. "It's not the polls. It's the ratings," he explained in 2016.

In the tumultuous throes of the global pandemic in 2020, Trump took the stage in the White House briefing room almost every day for weeks to spin a bizarre succession of stories, boasting and deceiving, and contradicting his own health experts -- and blaming others for his lethally pathetic performance in the crisis. After he recommended ingesting disinfectants to cope with COVID-19, even Republicans timidly distanced themselves from his hope-y quackery. Trump actually said, "Supposing we hit the body with a tremendous, whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light ... And then I see the disinfectant. Where it knocks it out in a minute, one minute, and is there a way we can do something like that by injections inside or almost a cleaning, cause you see it gets on the

lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs." Bizarro!

Trump declared during COVID briefings that he has absolute authority, but no responsibility. He chose to delegate responsibility to state governors to handle many matters, but refused to provide needed funds for state and local governments to give first responders higher pay to help cope with the pandemic. He even infamously promoted an antimalarial drug as a possible miracle cure, like a snake oil huckster salesman. And he declared he would stop providing funding to the World Health Organization right in the middle of the worst global pandemic since 1918. This was a reactive effort to scapegoat the organization to distract the American people from his administration's deadly mishandling of the carnage being caused by the coronavirus crisis. This action was "*Unthinkable*. Yet this is just another example of the Trump administration putting politics before people's lives." This politicizing of safety measures was all but criminal.

Trump Republican scandals are so pervasive and all consuming of people's attention that they suck the oxygen out of the room and divert attention from the real treachery that was committed against the public by undermining the social safety net and environmental protections, and public health, public education, reproductive rights, domestic tranquility, the general welfare, checks and balances, national security, the prospects for survival of humanity in the future and indeed all other forms of life on Earth.

The political party of the self-proclaimed Moral Majority has become the influence-abusing party of moral turpitude, anti-egalitarian self-interest, betrayals of public trust, and discriminatory white supremacy.

Recall again that Mark Twain's ultimate test of true patriotism was loyalty to the country and the Constitution and the virtuous values they represent, and not the tawdry gilded variety of false patriotism that Trump demands of loyalty to him and his cronies in office, even though he is a demagogue and master manipulator who demands unwavering loyalty to himself and his scheming anti-democratic authority-abusing political party.

Like America Firsters in Charles Lindbergh's fictitious fascist presidency during the early 1940s, as told in *The Plot Against America*, today's deceived Trump supporters and opponents of expansive healthcare for all, and assorted religious fundamentalists and gun zealots, pretend they are patriots while they help enable a backward despotic agenda and give unwitting support to the appointment of right-wing judges who will likely decide most issues in favor of abusers of power rather than the people, for decades to come.

An Assessment of the Intelligence of Economic Policies

Historical events can provide both valuable illumination and cautionary guidance. Two nations have demonstrated notable success in the best way to create a growing middle class. In Brazil, 40 million people were moved from the ranks of poverty to the middle class between 2002 and 2010, and extreme poverty was significantly reduced. This progress was achieved by implementing a smart economic strategy that expanded access to public education, improved economic security, increased access to credit, reduced income inequality, and promoted social mobility. The burgeoning size of the middle class in Brazil drove a boom in business, so these initiatives stimulated demand for products and services and fueled economic growth and created many jobs.

Brazil's strategy was a much better plan than the U.S. trickle-down ideology of cutting taxes on rich people so that they might stimulate the economy by investing in businesses and spending money on luxury consumer goods, yachts, vacation homes and speculative investments. Robust demand created by a prosperous middle class is a key to business creation and job creation, especially in the U.S. where consumers do 70% of all spending. Businesses need a broad base of people who can afford to buy their products. This is one reason that social policies that have the effect of eviscerating the middle class and slashing support for the working poor are generally wrongheaded.

The net result of our national policies in the past 40 years has been a significant increase in inequalities, and a poverty rate that is near the highest level in generations. In contrast, the upshot of Brazil's fair and intelligent policies (before the ruthless autocrat Jair Bolsonaro came to power) was to achieve goals we should aspire to: strengthening the middle class, reducing poverty, and diminishing inequalities between rich and poor.

Political corruption and then the ascendancy of a right-wing populist have unfortunately derailed Brazil's success in the recent years, and inflation and interest rates have been soaring, and falling oil and commodity prices have led to economic hardships. It is obviously unacceptably risky to allow entrenched corruption by business and political

elites, and legislative graft, and fiscally improvident mismanagement -- and the politicizing of public health during the pandemic. Let's heed this cautionary tale! Heed also risks inherent in right wing takeovers of vulnerable countries, like that occasioned by the Trumpian demagogic leader Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Helping to Ensure the General Welfare

The second country that provides clear evidence that smarter national policies can contribute to the greater good is the United States itself, during the period from 1945 to 1980. The national policies implemented during this 35-year period helped create a vibrant middle class by paying G.I. Bill benefits for returning servicemen and large public investments in higher education and construction of an extensive interstate highway system. To pay for these initiatives while having record levels of debt incurred in fighting World War II, marginal tax rates on the highest levels of income were 70% or higher each and every year.

Ronald Reagan's actions to slash these rates to 28% are the upshot of conservatives always lobbying insistently for lower rates. Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan staunchly contended in 2012 that 25% would be a fairer marginal rate than the then-current 35%. They claimed that cutting taxes on high incomes and profitable corporations is the only acceptable national plan, despite the facts of what really constitute the greater good. Almost every Republican politician mindlessly echoes blind faith in these ideologies and marches like lemmings to the same shrewd and sycophantic calculus.

As debt in countries worldwide has become excessive, it becomes clear that this regressive debt-financed tax-cutting ruse can no longer be acceptable, as British Prime Minister Liz Truss found out after her attempt to give rich people more tax breaks upon assuming office.

American politicians often use devious talking points and carefully orchestrated deceptions to gain support for policies favorable to elite constituencies. For instance, the super-rich often cite the loss of family farms when trying to justify lower taxes on the two-tenths of 1% of inherited estates that are big enough to be subject to any estate tax at all. The fact is, however, that lower inheritance taxes exclusively benefit the richest Americans -- and only relatively few family farmers. If we truly want to create a meritocracy rather than an aristocracy of inherited wealth and privilege, we need a well-designed progressive tax on large estates. Reductions in estate taxes since 2001 have been one of several ruses that have served to shift the burden of taxation from the richest people to everyone else, and to cause the national debt to skyrocket.

Not only do the 400 richest Americans have more wealth than the bottom 180 million combined, but the U.S. has the highest inequality of wealth in the industrialized world. Globally, the richest 2% of people own more than half of all assets. These are sobering facts. In the long run, extreme inequalities like this serve to create a risky state of affairs for everyone. Policies that make most Americans more insecure and more stressed and more desperate are downright dumb, because turning up the heat on a pressure cooker that has an improperly designed pressure-release valve is exceedingly ill advised!

The extraordinarily successful billionaire businessman and investor Warren Buffett has repeatedly pointed out the folly of having a tax system in which people who make millions of dollars pay much lower tax rates than their secretaries. Wealthy people pay a much lower percentage of their incomes because they have used their outsized influence to get excessively favorable tax treatment for capital gains compared to rates assessed on wages. Unyielding ideological arguments are adduced by representatives of rich conservatives to keep taxes low on income earned from owning capital assets. It seems outrageous, however, for people who work hard for their money to be required to pay higher tax rates on their earned incomes than people who get money from business profits or investments in stocks or real estate. Those who inherit large sums of money, common sense tells us, or those who have accumulated it due to unfair aspects of our capitalist system, should be required to pay rates on their incomes that are at least as high as the rates paid by working people!

Warren Buffett has also sagely observed that opportunity and motivation are stifled by regressive tax plans. He testified to the Senate Finance Committee in 2007 in defense of federal estate taxes. He invoked the historical roots of these taxes, which were established in 1916 to prevent anti-democratic concentrations of wealth and power. "Dynastic wealth, the enemy of meritocracy, is on the rise," Buffett told the panel. "Equality of opportunity

has been on the decline. A meaningful progressive estate tax is needed to curb the movement of a democracy toward plutocracy." He added: "Tax-law changes have benefited this super-rich group, including me, in a huge way." It is time to reverse these changes by re-instituting higher estate taxes. Contrarily, Republicans are pushing to eliminate these taxes altogether. Political corruption obviously thrives in the USA!

Republican President Theodore Roosevelt made an important declaration in his New Nationalism Speech in 1910: "The really big fortune, the swollen fortune, by the mere fact of its size, acquires qualities which differentiate it in kind, as well as in degree, from what is possessed by men of relatively small means. Therefore, I believe in a graduated income tax on big fortunes, and in another tax which is far more easily collected and far more effective: that is, a graduated inheritance tax on big fortunes, properly safeguarded against evasion, and increasing rapidly in amount with the size of the estate."

The Follies of Militarism

Another pathetic aspect of the American capitalist system is the hyper-stimulus of spending on arms and the military. This was one of the central pillars of the Reagan Revolution. This gambit primarily benefitted the few at the expense of the many. Ramped-up spending on the military generates huge profits for special interest groups invested in arms manufacturing and war services industries in the military-industrial complex. Wealthy people, CEOs and big shareholders are the main beneficiaries of these profits, and these people are being granted a very costly entitlement of paying taxes on these windfalls at very low capital gains rates.

Mark Twain had declared he was an anti-imperialist and wrote scathing words about the American intervention in the Philippines during the Philippine-American War between 1898 and 1902. Terrible atrocities took place during that offensive against Philippine nationalists who were fighting for independence.

General Smedley D. Butler -- you gotta love that name! -- was purportedly the most decorated Marine in U.S. history at the time of his death in 1940. General Butler expressed deep regrets at the end of his heroic military career about the role he had played in wars. In speeches and a book titled *War Is A Racket*, he stated that war is a racket "conducted for the benefit of the very few, at the expense of the very many." ... "It is possibly the oldest racket, and easily the most profitable, and surely the most vicious. It is the only one international in scope. It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives."

Not long after Smedley Butler spoke these words about the war racket, the bitter seeds of World War II began to sprout. History tells us that the German war machine was partially fueled by U.S. business interests, and was financed in part by American bankers like Prescott Bush, the father of George H.W. Bush and grandfather of George W. Bush. This fact really taints any claimed righteous integrity of the influence of the Bush family in our national politics!

The United States has spent an amount on the military since World War II that is roughly equal to the record level of the total national debt today, so one way of seeing this situation could be that we have basically borrowed the total amount of money spent on wars and the military. Military spending serves two main unspoken purposes -- to protect U.S. business interests abroad and to enhance opportunities for entrenched interest groups to maximize profit making by entities involved in military-industrial complex activities. Considering this fact, it would be smart to require military spending to be financed partially by taxes on outsized profits earned by businesses involved in war services and munitions sales, and by higher taxes on interest groups like Big Oil that primarily benefit from military interventions in oil-producing regions.

High levels of spending on the military make it much easier for the U.S. to project domineering power around the globe. This power is often used to defend interests of financial elites and giant multinational corporations, and to ensure access to oil and natural resources of other countries around the world, and to enforce economic and political shock-doctrine policies and too-big-to-fail banking schemes and other "free-market" doctrines.

General Douglas MacArthur made this insightful observation in 1952: "It is a part of the general pattern of misguided policy that our country is now geared to an arms economy, which was bred in an artificially induced psychosis of war hysteria and nurtured upon an incessant propaganda of fear."

Military adventurism serves to distract people's attention from domestic issues, and divert financial resources from them. By exploiting nationalistic, ethnocentric and hawkish patriotic impulses, such diversions keep people from rising up and demanding fairer domestic policies. High spending on the military represents a misallocation of funds that has the effect of crowding out other investments. Many alternative investments would provide much better outcomes from the point of view of society as a whole. Especially good ideas can be found in well-managed investments in public education, research and development, cleaner energy, public transportation, infrastructure improvements, a more secure social safety net, and saner environmental protections.

This is an age-old "guns versus butter" debate that has roiled politics for generations. Hear John Steinbeck, who wrote the following words in his *Log from the Sea of Cortez* during the expedition he made in 1940 with his wonderful philosophic friend Doc Ed Ricketts: "There is a war now which no one wants to fight, in which no one can see a gain: a zombie war of sleep-walkers which nevertheless goes on out of all control of intelligence. Some time ago a Congress of honest men refused an appropriation of *several hundreds of millions of dollars* to feed our people. They said, and meant it, that the economic structure of the country would collapse under the pressure of such expenditure. And now the same men, just as honestly, are devoting *many billions* to the manufacture, transportation, and detonation of explosives to protect the people they would not feed."

Dwight D. Eisenhower made a similarly compelling statement in 1953, with these words: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

Social critic Dick Gregory deepened this understanding by once making this entertainingly astute observation: "I don't know why America always thinks she has to run all around the world forcing people to take our way of governance at the barrel of a gun. When you've got something really good, you don't have to force it on people. ***They will steal it!***"

Zing! -- I love that concept! Notably, the United States wants to share more than our way of government with other countries. We want them to agree to honor "free market" competition, corporate-friendly international trade agreements, laissez-faire governance, easy movements of capital around the world, and uninterrupted U.S. dominance of international affairs. These things often turn out to be distinctly disadvantageous to developing countries in a variety of ways. Free access for our banks and industries in other nations creates many problems, and foreign governments are forced to collaborate with the U.S. in managing the crises that crop up as a result. And we give fodder to those radical rascals who contend that the U.S. often acts like a ruthlessly aggressive imperialistic nation.

Aggression in military might and rash debt financing are socially undesirable schemes that are compounded by correlated increases in inequities and the subversion of democratic fairness. Amoral abuses of power by big corporations and the political right make this state of affairs worse. My personal bias tells me that supposedly conservative politicians, in particular, have been abusing their civic responsibilities by staunchly advocating retrogressive policies. And Trump was a calamity in this regard. Broader and deeper perspectives on military issues can be found in *Reflections on War - and Peace!* -- see online, or in Book Six of the Earth Manifesto.

Constructive Criticism and Visionary Understandings

Many supporters of the U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War gave withering criticism to peace activists, war dissidents, conscientious objectors and whistleblowers. "Love It or Leave It," they declared. They accused former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg of being "the most dangerous man in America" for having released the infamous Pentagon Papers. These documents valuably revealed that the U.S. government routinely suppressed crucial information and used deceptions, false pretexts and outright lies to sell the Vietnam War to the American people. The federal government also spied on and intimidated and punished dissenters to advance its misguided military goals, a fact that is anti-democratic and deeply disturbing.

"A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

--- Mark Twain

Honest and constructive criticism is of great value, especially in matters that concern highly inequitable social policies and unjust abuses of power, and the folly of hyper-costly arms races and shortsighted thinking in ecological matters. A convincing case can be made that good governance relies on civil debate, broad-minded dissent, boldly expressed concerns for the true public interest and farsighted understandings that are expressed by ethical journalists and honest leaders. It is right and proper that inspectors general and conscientious whistleblowers are protected in their abilities to courageously expose fraud, corruption and deceit. Some conservatives, in contrast, seem to conveniently regard these honorable things as subversive.

"You measure a democracy by the freedom it gives its dissidents", said political activist Abbie Hoffman, "not the freedom it gives its assimilated conformists."

Let me tell you an entertaining and illuminating story concerning some of John Steinbeck's wise observations. Here is an excerpt from *Tall Tales, Provocative Parables, Luminous Clarity and Evocative Truths: A Modern Log from the Sea of Cortez*:

Sometimes there is a natural serendipity of cause and effect. On these rare occasions, the unintended consequences of activities actually turn out to be salubrious. Don't you love it when this happens? How sweet it is! Consider, as an interesting instance, the circumstances that surrounded a tuna fishery that John Steinbeck describes in his *Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The fishermen of Cabo San Lucas, the town that lies on the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula, once caught great quantities of tuna. The tuna were canned in a cannery on the pier, and the fish guts and cuttings of the tuna were thrown into the bay from the end of the pier. This refuse brought in schools of small fish, which were then netted and used for bait to catch more tuna. Voila, a closed circle, and perfectly fortuitous good luck!

There was, however, a proverbial fly in this otherwise "perfect ecological ointment". The schools of fish were driven away from the pier by black cormorants, which are big gangly birds that dove into the bay to catch the small fish. "Thus", writes Steinbeck, "they are considered interlopers, radicals, subversive forces against the perfect and God-set balance on Cape San Lucas. And they are rightly slaughtered, as all radicals should be. As one of our number remarked, <Why, pretty soon they'll want to vote.>"

Steinbeck scholars indicate that the modest and soft-spoken author was sensitive to creatures being considered subversives for a cogent personal reason: his novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* had achieved great fame, and this had brought him notoriety, hate mail and even surveillance by the FBI. His literary themes were unsettling to the privileged, who feared anyone poignantly pointing out the social problems related to poor people and the plight of immigrants and farm workers, or startling contrasts in economic inequities, or other failings of the ruthless dog-eat-dog capitalist system. Great literature evokes universal themes and images, so it provides deeper contexts in which readers can more viscerally understand. It is sometimes 'subversive' of the status quo, but it is even more valuable for being so!

The "love it or leave it" crowd of apologists for military interventions by the United States started going off the rails when we had a smart and somewhat progressive black man as president. Deep paranoia seems to afflict people who have been indoctrinated to fear the federal government, and conservatives have been peddling the story that "the government is the problem" since Ronald Reagan told them so. These folks contend, for instance, that restrictions on gun sales are a threat to people's liberties. This is why many of them staunchly oppose background checks on all gun sales and sensible restrictions on the ownership of assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition clips. Gun sales were at record highs during Barack Obama's tenure in office, and with fears fomented by the right-wing fringe running deep, a correlated opposition to compromise and good solutions to gun violence problems virulently obstructed collaborative reforms for safety.

When conservatives in the 1960s told liberals to love America or leave it, they charged conscientious objectors and proponents of peace with a lack of patriotism for not blindly following the federal government in support of the Vietnam War. Today, when gun rights enthusiasts defend unrestricted access to guns and assault weapons, they rationalize their rigid stances by asserting a need to possess an arsenal of weapons *in case they need to fight the*

government with lethal force. This blatantly hypocritical contradiction has deep roots, stimulated by fear mongering, and we should try honestly to better understand them -- and to counteract their influence.

Maybe some light is shed on this issue by the actions of domestic extremists in Oregon in January 2016. Armed militia groups from outside the state occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, thereby putting an important wildlife refuge at risk. The unfortunate occupation violated the most basic principles of the Public Trust Doctrine by holding public lands and resources hostage to serve an illiberal political agenda of the occupiers. The militia used a flimsy pretext to justify their actions, which involved two local ranchers being convicted and jailed for arson and poaching on public lands. Notably, neither the local community nor the individuals convicted had requested or endorsed the occupation or the assistance of militia groups.

Trump Provides a Startling Perspective

Donald Trump made many outrageous moves as president, like trying to ban Muslims from coming to the United States and mercilessly separating migrant children from their parents. In doing so, he helped drive Republican politicians further to the right. A serious paucity of civility has resulted, as was witnessed on the debate stage in Las Vegas on December 15, 2015, when every Republican candidate strived to scapegoat immigrants and harshly denigrate President Obama. They all decried "political correctness" in their fervor to get on the groupthink bandwagon of blaming Muslims for the terrorist tactics of Islamic extremists, even though this folly plays into the hands of recruiters for reactionary and terrorist causes on social media, who take advantage of disaffected individuals to promote fanatical violence or jihad "holy war". And it's déjà vu all over again in 2024.

But look here! Trump's arrogant and insulting character frees him to say things during his election campaigns that few other Republicans would consider. Here is a sensational one, back in 2015, which happens to ring with a tenor of ideology-transcending truth. This was a remarkably blunt denunciation of the Iraq War that Trump made during the Republican candidate's debate in December 2015. Listen in:

"We've spent \$4 trillion trying to topple various people that, frankly, if they were there and if we could have spent that \$4 trillion in the United States to fix our roads, our bridges, and all of the other problems -- our airports and all the other problems we have -- we would have been a lot better off, I can tell you that right now. We have done a tremendous disservice not only to the Middle East -- we've done a tremendous disservice to humanity. The people that have been killed, the people that have been wiped away -- and for what? It's not like we had victory. It's a mess. The Middle East is totally destabilized, a total and complete mess. I wish we had the 4 trillion dollars or 5 trillion dollars. I wish it were spent right here in the United States on schools, hospitals, roads, airports, and everything else that are all falling apart!"

Andrew Prokop wrote: "Trump has identified an opportunity left open by the polarized two-party system. By pairing his tough rhetoric and persona and avowed nationalism with various efforts to play to Americans' racial anxieties on immigration and terrorism, he can convincingly tell conservatives the Iraq War has been a disaster. And here again, he may come off to voters as more honest and straight-talking than the other candidates."

An Interlude of Mental Calisthenics

Here's an interesting exercise for the inquiring mind. Alert! What individuals do you think have had the most far-reaching impacts on humanity in the last two centuries? Here's my conjecture: Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. Charles Darwin gave us startling insights into the biological evolution of life on Earth through the processes of natural selection. Sigmund Freud revealed some early ideas about the subconscious psychological nature of human drives and the complex workings of the human brain. And the visionary Albert Einstein provided us with brilliantly abstruse understandings of spacetime physics, along with some real valuable philosophical perspectives.

Remarkably, Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud collaborated together in 1932 in an exchange of letters related to issues of war and politics. The Institute for Intellectual Cooperation had invited Einstein to undertake a correspondence with any thinker of his choice in the world. Einstein chose Sigmund Freud, and he began by proposing an idea that he had been refining over the years. To reduce risks of war, he contended, required nations to surrender some of their sovereignty to a "supranational organization competent to render verdicts of

incontestable authority and enforce absolute submission to the execution of its verdicts." He was basically recommending that a new international body should be created that has more authority than the ineffective League of Nations, which had been organized after the horrible devastation of the First World War.

Who are we to dispute with one of the most brilliant minds in history, a man who has conceived the Biggest Picture perspective of the universe ever imagined? Let's give the United Nations more power and funding, and work together to make the world a safer, more peaceable place.

Einstein and Freud concluded their correspondence with an observation that instinctively aggressive drives are too central to our human nature to be effectively suppressed. Not long thereafter, a rude confirmation of this assertion was to arrive. Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, nearly coinciding with the time this correspondence between Einstein and Freud was published. By then, many countries were already working feverishly to improve the destructive capabilities of their armaments, and the most lethal war in human history was in the early stages of unfolding.

Curiously, Einstein and Freud may have been wrong in one regard. Modern evolutionary biologists say that, in the biggest picture understanding of human evolution, cooperation has played an even more significant role in the differential survival of human clans than ruthlessly aggressive competition. In any case, as biographer Walter Isaacson noted, "Einstein, like a good scientist, was by then revising his theories based on new facts."

All hopes for a "supranational organization" were put off until after World War II ended in 1945. Then the United Nations was established, and it has done a commendable job of articulating a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and of working for international peace and combating diseases and promoting environmental sanity, among many other important accomplishments. Many nations worldwide still have not been willing to give the UN more generous funding or adequate power, but this serves to reinforce understandings that Einstein was right when he called for a more powerful international organization to help ensure peaceful conflict resolution.

Cultural change proceeds at a much faster pace than the biological evolution of human genes, so cultural evolution offers us better hopes for our being able to actually choose a more auspicious future. Cultural adaptation has been especially beneficial through good contributions made by civic organizations, mutual trade collaboration, fair rules of law, democratic governance, non-governmental organizations, the value of greater understandings, and the many blessings of peaceful coexistence.

Corporations began their transformation into multinational organizations long ago, but a dramatic acceleration has taken place in recent decades as globalization trends have allowed many of these entities to sprawl beyond the control of national governments. There are some positive aspects of this rapidly progressing development, and one is this: it is causing us to become more aware of our being interconnected and interdependent. This is why Albert Einstein was correct in saying that humanity's best hope for a saner civilization resides in some form of international laws that all nations agree on -- with more reasonable compromises to be made by all.

In April 2013, the General Assembly of the United Nations approved the first international treaty ever to regulate the multibillion-dollar global arms trade. Overwhelming support was shown for the proposal, with only three rogue nations opposing the treaty. Attention! Which three? Oh, yes, those rogue nations, Iran and Syria and North Korea. What do you think the chances are that the U.S. Senate would ratify this treaty? Experts and pundits alike said, "No way!" Ratification in the Senate was unlikely for the simple reason that ratification of treaties requires a two-thirds majority of Senators, and too many of our representatives in Congress are beholden to following the dictates of Big Money, the arms industry and the reactionary uncompromising NRA.

It is a bizarre curiosity that one group of Americans joined Iran, Syria and North Korea in opposition to this smart-minded treaty. Tarnation! -- which one? -- Ah, yes, of course, it was the NRA. Perhaps the NRA should be designated a terrorist organization! After the worst shooting massacre in modern American history in Las Vegas, this characterization rang truer, and many mass shootings since then (like the one at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida) have brought closer scrutiny to the NRA's intransigence and nefarious influence.

Albert Einstein was repulsed by ultra-nationalism and German militarism from the early days of his youth. He felt compelled to renounce his German citizenship in 1896 when he was 17 years old, after he had moved to Switzerland

to attend college at Zurich Polytechnic. His belief in a new supranational organization that would be effective in transcending the militant aspects of national sovereignty was a reflection of his pacifist views. It stands to reason that a better-empowered international entity would be a good way to resolve disputes and prevent war. This idea has merit! Let's demand that our leaders ratify the agreement on the global arms trade.

Investigating One of the Most Serious of All Environmental Risks

Capitalist economic systems are good at producing goods and services, and at hyper-promoting the consumption of these things, and at making energetic efforts to maximize profits. This is generally detrimental to the environmental commons and the prospects of our heirs. Most scientists believe that climate change caused by human activities is probably the most serious environmental concern facing humanity.

The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change called climate change "the defining challenge of our age" in its Fourth Assessment Report on global warming trends. The time has come for us to collaborate together to deal effectively with this ominous problem. Extreme weather events in the United States have cost American families, businesses and the federal government many hundreds of billions of dollars in the last five years alone. The year 2017 proved to be exceptionally calamitous. As we spew more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, "natural disasters" are going to become more frequent, and more costly. It would be smart for us to take bold precautionary measures NOW to deal with this issue, so comprehensive climate legislation should be passed that assesses a fee on carbon pollution emissions. The revenue generated should be used to fund investments in energy efficiency and sustainable energy technologies that generate cleaner power from wind, solar, geothermal heat and biomass. I encourage readers to peruse my essay *Climate Change Considerations, Carrying Capacity, and Ecological Overshoot* for broader understanding of related issues.

Another Economic Conundrum of Capitalism

There is another big problem with our system of democratic capitalism: It has become more like a plutocracy in the past four decades. Vested interests have succeeded in getting our representatives to reduce taxes on income from corporate dividends and capital gains to very low rates, so that rich people pay low effective rates on their huge incomes. This is an outrageous contrast to the much higher percentages that ordinary Americans pay in taxes on wages they earn from working for a living, so it is simply wrong. The top 1% of taxpayers receives more than two-thirds of all capital gains, so the low 15% tax rate on capital gains is mainly a benefit to this small fraction of Americans. It would be much fairer to assess taxes on capital gains at the same rate as ordinary income. This should be one of many reforms that should be made to the U.S. tax code.

Wealthy people are members of what Robert Frank once called "Richistan". These people have been getting their way at the expense of everyone else for decades. They achieve this narrow felicity through the simple expediency of politically corrupting our democratic republic. Instead of working to make our society fairer, many of our political representatives pander mainly to big corporations and the demands of the wealthiest 1% of Americans, helping them maximize their financial rewards at the expense of others.

The bottom line of these tax system shenanigans has been a rapid increase in the national debt from less than \$1 trillion in 1980 to over \$31 trillion in October 2022. This trend is mainly caused by ploys that are fiscally irresponsible and generationally unfair. It is a mortgaging of future generations that is creating one of the biggest risks to the security of the American people in our country's history. This excessive level of debt is providing powerful impetus to the politics of austerity. And, if it continues to be inadequately controlled, this failure could easily lead to an international debt crisis that could cause extensive adversities to billions of people worldwide. Surely, we would be well advised to take sensible, courageous and effective steps to avert such a possibility! Republicans and obsequious Trump loyalists refuse to acknowledge and ameliorate these risks!

It is no wonder that many people almost hate our political system when elections are approaching, due to fear mongering in political ads and blaming, scapegoating, negative spin, character assassinations and deceptive arguments. On top of this costly barrage of persuasion, obnoxiously incessant fund-raising appeals make it ever clearer that serious campaign finance reform is needed. Also, the knowledge that our political system and governance are so corrupted by Big Money tends to make the majority of the people cynical about fairness of

representation in our politics. It is discouraging to see that our elected representatives too often dash our hopes of having them really champion our personal and collective best interests.

A True Pro-Life Perspective

Mainstream politics in the 21st century has become, to a large degree, a "sham battle" between people who take opposing sides on hot button social issues. This conflict distracts people from bigger problems. We have far more serious concerns to quarrel over than hot button social issues!

The most blatant examples of cultural anger generated by barrages of attack ads and manipulative persuasion are those relating to anti-abortion activists and anti-immigrant passions. Dividers have generated intense fervor by provoking these passions, and they have shrewdly exploited these emotions to achieve their real underlying goal -- of ensuring that wealthy people are allowed to continue to control and dictate our national priorities.

Conservative cultural anger seems to be, in part, a reactive backlash against desegregation laws and women having been given reproductive rights in the *Roe vs. Wade* decision on abortion rights. Anger has also been fomented against collective bargaining rights for public employees, and against increasing trends toward allowing gay people to have fair civil rights, and against sensible gun safety initiatives. Frustrations and anger have been aroused against scapegoated Big Government, in general. Intolerance, racism, sexism and ideological myopia also play a part in these attitudes.

Astonishing ironies have resulted from this emotional hijacking of the American people, and from the radical rightward tilt of the Republican Party. Hard-line conservatives have grown increasingly opposed to abortion, even in cases of rape or incest. These partisans piously proclaim that they are "pro-life". But at the same time they push policies that are extensively contrary to the true sanctity of life, and to the real cause of liberty, and to a better quality of life for those alive at this moment in time.

"Respect for life has to include respect for how that life is lived, enhanced and protected -- not only at the moment of conception but afterward, in the course of that life."

--- Thomas L. Friedman, *Why I am Pro-Life*

Stubbornly uncompromising Republican stances against abortion not only drastically diminish women's rights, but also are puritanical, prudish, misogynistic, and excessive in imposing male patriarchal control over females. From this standpoint, they are reactionary and morally wrong. When such "pro-life" people claim they believe in the sanctity of life, they ignore the fact that, if life were to be honestly regarded as sacred, any policies that contribute to impoverishment of people who are already alive (like mothers and children) would be abhorrent.

Conservatives tend to oppose universal healthcare and support the death penalty, and obstruct sensible laws to limit access to semi-automatic assault weapons. They are generally eager to eliminate many programs that help people lead healthier and more secure lives. Many of them even oppose sensible protections of the environment, and pollution prevention laws, and reasonable ways of dealing with climate change. These stances undermine our national well-being, and threaten countless species of life on Earth.

"Look." Tens of thousands of women die every year in countries where safe abortions are illegal, and many women have abortions that are performed in unsafe conditions. In Nigeria, where abortions are against the law (with a sole exception of when the procedure is necessary to save a woman's life), thousands of women die every year from complications resulting from unsafe abortions. The real effect of anti-abortion policies imposed by Republican politicians is to condemn many pregnant women to suffering and even death, and to make tens of thousands of them and their doctors into criminals, and to force hundreds of thousands of women into having babies they do not want. In light of the fact that 85% of women who get abortions in the U.S. every year are unmarried, outlawing abortion is a mercilessly extreme form of lethally dangerous policy that puts unmarried women's lives at risk. It is beyond outrageous to force women to risk their lives to satisfy rightwing ideologues.

Nigeria has a land area less than 12 percent the size of the contiguous 48 states, yet it has 218 million people, or over 60% as many as the United States. If the U.S. population had almost quadrupled in the last 50 years, like Nigeria's has done, there would be something like 800 million Americans today instead of 333 million, and there would be commensurate need for much more Big Government to control the masses, and to deal with the

widespread problems that such numbers would create. And the blatant stupidity of pro-embryo, pro-birth, anti-women's rights policies would be that much more colossally absurd.

If the density of the U.S. population was as great as the density of people living in Nigeria (218 million people in 357 million square miles), then there would be almost 2 billion Americans instead of 333 million in the U.S., and just try to imagine the traffic alone!

Our great strength lies in unity, not in rule by divide-to-conquer authoritarians, so we should act to prevent Big Money from subverting our democracy and allowing shrewdly Machiavellian machinations by political operatives to divide us asunder. I feel strongly that a sincere and truly moral pro-life stance is the only sensible and honorable one to espouse and support.

Understand this clearly. Morality is a vital glue of society, for it is concerned with the judgment of what is "good" and "bad" in human character and action. The true moral good consists of those things that are essential to the health, well-being and security of the entire group.

Today, intense conflicts of opinions and religious dogmas are being exploited to drive people apart. The fact of the matter, however, is that boldly broad-minded cooperative efforts are needed to build a more just society and give higher priority to the greater good. This represents the ultimate moral good. Machiavelli was right when he wrote that "Politics have no relation to morals." But that should not be the case. Redesign!

"O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth!"

--- Thomas Paine, urging Americans to action to end British tyranny

We should give more sway not only to considerations of the quality of life for people alive today, but also for the quality of life that our actions today imply for our descendants. Unfortunately, a better quality of life for the vast majority of Americans is being sacrificed to the conceits and entitled attitudes of the 2% of Americans who have annual incomes in excess of \$250,000. The security of most Americans is being sacrificed to the zeal of most millionaires and billionaires to be allowed to pay low taxes on top levels of their incomes.

Fervent embraces of economic ideologies that promote the maximizing of profits are contrary to a true pro-life position when they involve narrow and unethical gambits that allow the costs of health-harming air pollution, water pollution and toxic wastes to be foisted onto society. On a more far-reaching scale that seriously affects future generations, it is contrary to an honest pro-life position to allow the wasteful depletion of life-enabling resources and widespread damages to natural ecosystems, along with uncontrolled emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere that disrupt normal weather patterns and contribute to more destructive storms, floods, droughts and wildfires.

Almost every form of life on Earth is threatened by our failure to support initiatives that would help protect the environment, prevent pollution, and deal sensibly with climate disruptions. An arrogant lack of respect for all non-human forms of life on Earth is not a pro-life approach to policy-making. Those who push to overturn the Endangered Species Act are not acting in a true pro-life way, and neither are those who want to encourage the aggressively destructive exploitation of public lands.

"He who takes nature for his guide, is not easily beaten out of his argument."

--- Thomas Paine

Choosing to stubbornly oppose freely available contraceptives, including emergency "morning-after pills", at the expense of women's prerogatives to prevent pregnancy, is to be rudely unempathetic, draconianly discriminatory, paternalistic, and heedlessly unconcerned with the real quality of life. With more than 8 billion people on Earth today, religious authorities and church dogmas that say we must be fruitful and multiply no longer add up. Opposition to family planning choices and women's freedom of choice is simply not a valid life-affirming attitude.

There are more than 40 million abortions in the world every year. If zealots who say they are "pro-life" really want to reduce this number, it could easily be done by promoting the use of contraceptives and the morning-after pill and other birth control methods, and by making family planning options freely available to women and men worldwide. "Pro-life" people, come to your senses! Not only would such initiatives prevent millions of abortions

every year, they could prevent countless cases of sexually-transmitted diseases, thereby eliminating an untold amount of unnecessary suffering.

Anyone opposed to abortion should be strongly supportive of easy access or free availability to birth control. Up to two-thirds of all abortions in the United States could be prevented by such a policy. Researchers at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis offered free birth control to more than 9,000 mostly low-income women and teenagers, and found out that the number of unplanned pregnancies in the group fell between 60% and 80% below the national average. Receiving free birth control made teens just one-sixth as likely to get pregnant. Since this group is particularly susceptible to becoming pregnant, no-cost birth control would be a key plan for reducing unintended pregnancies and abortions -- and unwanted children.

The United Nations explicitly described family planning as a "universal human right" for the first time in 2012. With this declaration, the United Nations effectively made the case that legal, cultural and financial barriers to accessing contraception and other family planning measures are an infringement of women's rights. The time has come today for governments, and the Catholic Church and other religious establishments, to acknowledge this right to women everywhere.

"Conservatives" tend to champion expansive rights of personhood for a fertilized egg, no matter how conception occurs, at the expense of a woman's liberties and right to exert control over her health, bodily autonomy and future. Such attitudes are conspicuously contrary to respect for women's lives. It is preposterous to posit that life begins at conception and then ignore the needs of mothers and children once a baby is born.

Another important consideration is that open-minded and generous "good neighbor" attitudes that serve to reinforce the Golden Rule ethic of reciprocity and mutual security for peoples in all countries are much truer pro-life stances than ethnocentric supremacism or domineering attitudes that rationalize military aggression. True pro-life stances would regard preemptive warfare and repressive military occupations of other nations as supremely unethical, and they would prevent "military Keynesian" policies that facilitate unethical profit maximizing by war services corporations and others involved in the military-industrial complex.

A First Step Required to Fix Our Democracy

The Supreme Court ruled by a 5-to-4 vote in June 2013 that some key provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were unconstitutional. Right-wing Justice Antonin Scalia had sent shock waves through the collective conscience by declaring earlier that Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act represents a "perpetuation of racial entitlement." This provision contains requirements for how states that have a history of making efforts to deprive minorities of voting rights can legally change their voting laws. It was a provision designed to prevent unfair changes to voting prerequisites or qualifications when the purpose of the changes was to discriminate against people on account of their race. Scalia's words made his attitude about voting rights starkly clear. He seems to see merit in racially discriminatory Jim Crow laws of yesteryear. Astonishingly, "conservatives" on the Supreme Court actually narrowly agreed with Scalia, and struck down parts of this eminently fair law.

As a perverse outcome of this ruling, many Republican-controlled states have enacted numerous restrictive voting laws. And long lines have been encountered in some voting places since then, as in Arizona primaries in March 2016, where there were 70 percent fewer polling places than in 2012 in Maricopa County (where Phoenix is located). All those polling places would not have been allowed to be eliminated if the Supreme Court had not eviscerated the Voting Rights Act. Many more aggressively restrictive laws have subsequently been proposed and enacted since the 2020 elections, with Republicans in almost every state waging egregious campaigns professing to care about "election integrity" that in fact resemble integrity-deficient "Jim Crow 2.0".

Sensationally, Antonin Scalia declared: "Whenever a society adopts racial entitlements, it is very difficult to get out of them through the normal political processes." In one sense, Antonin Scalia was sure right about "racial entitlements". Once black people were finally given the right to vote, as with women, it's definitely hard to take that right away! Not only has the political right been making concerted efforts to make it harder for people to vote by using tactics like reducing voting hours, but they have also used "caging lists" to purge voter registration rosters and deny many people their voting rights. Conservatives have passed many restrictive new voting laws in

Republican-controlled states, as well as having seriously gerrymandered congressional districts into bizarre contortions, particularly in the South. Their main purpose in these efforts is to give more undue influence to conservatives. Before the 2018 elections, this contributed to making the House of Representatives the least representative of moderate interests in modern history. Conservatives are also busy taking advantage of the Electoral College system to benefit rich people, corporations and right-wing elements of society so that they have a better chance of continuing to dominate our national decision-making. Despite having lost the national popular vote for president by a whopping 7 million votes in 2020. Donald Trump managed to narrowly win the 2016 election in the Electoral College, despite having lost the national popular vote by almost 3 million votes, and this proved to be highly negative for our country and the world. Then he lost the popular vote in 2020 by some 7 million votes, and desperately began promoting big lies about election fraud and incited an insurrectionary riot on January 6, 2021 against the certification of the 2020 presidential election, posing a grave threat to our democracy.

Sometimes the simplest solution to a problem is the best. To really make our nation a truer democracy, we should rightly enact a constitutional amendment stipulating that the President and members of Congress be chosen by direct popular vote: Whoever gets the most votes wins! This is one of the fairest ways to reform our elections -- let every citizen vote, and get rid of the antiquated Electoral College system. At the same time, actions should be taken to reduce the corrupting influence of Big Money in our national and state politics.

It is difficult to take away any right, perk, privilege, subsidy or loophole from any person or business, even if it has been gained by unethical means rather than fair, fiscally responsible, or ethical means. A concrete instance of this fact is that, once high-income earners were given the privilege of paying historically low tax rates on the highest levels of their incomes, it has been practically impossible to claw back even a small amount of that generosity. This is true despite the fact that such policies are saddling everyone in every future year with an unconscionably heavy burden of debt and interest expense obligations.

Ambrose Bierce, the journalist and satirist who was one of Mark Twain's prominent contemporaries, cynically defined a Conservative as a person who is enamored with existing injustices, "as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others." Ha! Surely we would be best served by seeing justice and injustices in the clearest possible light, and by using a balanced approach to redress all kinds of inequities.

Lee Atwater and Machiavellian Opportunists

It is striking to realize that the Republican Party has long indulged in a "Southern Strategy" of trying to get political support and win elections by crudely appealing to racism and bigotry against African Americans. This white supremacist strategy has been "successful" in many regards, particularly in the South where it has been a big contributing factor to a long-lasting electoral realignment of Southern states so that they generally elect conservative Republican representatives instead of more progressive Democrats. Curiously, most people in Southern States would actually be much better served by policies that are more progressive and inclusive, rather than ones that are retrogressive, divisive and contrary to the common good.

Why did this realignment take place? Remember, a majority of Southerners had voted for Democrats for 100 years after the Civil War, in reaction to Republican President Abraham Lincoln having freed slaves during the war. It was only after Democrats supported desegregation, and civil rights for Blacks, and the overturning of discriminatory Jim Crow laws in the 1960s that the South shifted to supporting Republicans again.

Lee Atwater, known as the "boogeyman" of Republican politics, was the first modern political operative to make extensive use of racism, dirty tricks, scandals and fear to gain power. Atwater adopted win-no-matter-what-the-cost strategies. He was a "slime slinger" who tried to fool Black people into thinking the Republican Party really cared about their interests. At age 40, Atwater developed a brain tumor and made deathbed confessions of what he realized were the wrongness of his actions. Karl Rove, in turn, chose to emulate these Machiavellian tactics to help give George W. Bush power, and then Steve Bannon goaded racial divisions to help Trump win.

The cost of this Southern Strategy has been increasing as minority populations grow, and as poverty increases, and as the Republican Party continues to largely ignore the interests of Blacks, Latinos, women, poor people and the middle class. In the 2012 and 2016 elections, this strategy contributed to a Republican rebuke in which more than

90% of black voters and 70% of Latino voters gave Democratic presidential candidates their votes. Republicans seemed to be beginning to realize they should seek sincere ways to truly appeal to minority voters, and women and young people, though their heart sure has not been in the endeavor. Truly comprehensive immigration reform, for instance, should have been undertaken and accomplished. "Evolve, guys!" Instead, they continue to make reprehensible leaps backwards with cynically devious, cruel and counterproductive policies.

After the rebuke Republicans received in the 2012 elections, some of their most prominent spokespersons acknowledged that their party desperately needed to improve its image. But Republican proposals for a make-over generally involve changing their sales pitch and manipulative messaging, rather than more honestly and responsibly being more fair-minded, or trying to substantially change the policies they push. When it comes to substance, Republicans should alter their obstinate commitment to policies and priorities that enrich the few to the detriment of the many.

An imperative is clear: fairer campaign finance laws and gerrymandering reforms are needed to prevent further distortions of our politics by narrowly focused interests. "One person, one vote" should again become the law of the land, and not the current corrupt system that is more like a "one dollar, one vote" system.

Voting Rights in Our Great Nation

Thomas Paine wrote passionately about fair representation of the people, envisioning a "one person, one vote" system as the best plan, and our nation's Founders had established it in 1789, in a narrow form. For the next 200 years, voting rights have been expanded to include other segments of the populace, like black men, and then women, and then 18 to 21-year-old young adults. The American people should be proud and thankful about this marvelous progressive expansion of fair representation in our nation.

But in recent years, our political system has been so corrupted by moneyed interests that it now resembles a much less fair "one dollar, one vote" system. Our representatives, as a result, have demonstrated an incapability of instituting markedly fairer national policies -- or restoring Clinton-era tax rates on the wealthy. This proves that the richest 2% of all Americans wrongly has more influence in our politics than the other 98% combined.

Hey, what's that sound? -- Look what's going down ... It may be our country's Founders turning over in their graves, in light of despotic Trump Republican abuses of power.

The Founding of our country makes a sensational story. A small group of aroused colonial leaders had gotten so angry at British oppressors by 1776 that they courageously risked everything by declaring independence, and they valiantly championed the visionary principles of the Enlightenment Era, headily asserting that "all men are created equal". Then, 12 years later, they created a brilliant Constitution to ensure a more perfect Union. Having committed the nation to these ideas in principle, they were not quite able to match their rule-making to their ideals. They granted the right to vote in the first national elections in 1788 only to white men who owned property -- about 6% of citizens. By 1830, individual states had expanded voting rights to include most adult white males. Expanding public education and increasing literacy allowed more people to assume democratic responsibilities, and our democracy was becoming more fairly representative.

Black males were given the right to vote after slaves were freed during the Civil War, with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1870. Women were finally given a more official voice in our society when they won the right to vote after a decades-long hard-fought battle for women's suffrage, with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Native Americans were given the right to vote in 1924. American citizens living in Washington D.C. were given the right to vote when the 23rd Amendment was ratified in 1961 (though they still have not been given representation in Congress.) Poll taxes that had been used to restrict voting rights were outlawed in 1964. Literacy tests and racist voting practices were prohibited by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Young adults between 18 and 21 were granted the right to vote in 1971, so that all those who risked their lives serving their country in the military would have a voice in national decision-making.

Unfortunately, conservative politicians in recent years have been fighting vigorously to reverse this fair-minded trend. They have been working to restrict voting rights, especially those of Blacks, Latinos, students, disabled

people and poor people. These anti-democratic initiatives have been implemented in many states controlled by Republican legislatures and governors. Such unethical, reprehensible tactics should be resoundingly rejected!

Republicans rationalize voter suppression efforts and recent opposition to vote-by-mail measures as a means to supposedly prevent voter fraud. But statistics show that instances of voter fraud are extremely rare. In stark contrast, Republicans have been trying to disenfranchise MILLIONS OF AMERICAN CITIZENS with their vote-restricting initiatives in dozens of states, especially in Georgia, Florida, Texas and Arizona.

I recommend that every registered voter be given a vote-by-mail ballot for all national and state elections, and that everyone be incentivized to vote. Just think of the amount of fossil fuels that would be saved by making it unnecessary for so many people to go to polling places and stand in long lines in some places to vote!

Tom Perkins' Shrewd but Idiotically Unjust Voting Scheme

Tom Perkins was a billionaire who was one of the original "venture capitalists", known for having co-founded the firm that became Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. Perkins, who subsequently died in June 2016, spoke with the *Fortune* magazine journalist Adam Lashinsky at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco in February 2014 in a program titled "The War on the 1%." Discussion focused on the issue of income inequality, and Perkins, 82 years old at the time, revealed his extreme opinions on social, fiscal and monetary policy, and also expressed his self-aggrandizing opinion that taxes are being used as a weapon against the wealthiest 1%.

At the end of the Commonwealth Club event, Perkins was challenged to say, in 60 seconds, how he would change the world for the better. He made "a playfully controversial response", and expressed admiration for the belief of Thomas Jefferson that only landowners should get the right to vote, and for Margaret Thatcher's conviction that only people who pay taxes should be allowed to vote. So this was his proposal: "The Tom Perkins system is: You don't get the vote if you don't pay a dollar in taxes. But what I really think is, it should be like a corporation. You pay a million dollars, you get a million votes. How's that?"

Billionaires, of course, already wield diabolically excessive influence through their tentacled intrigues and the giant megaphones of their enormous wealth, without any need to illegally stuff ballot boxes.

The audience laughed cynically, and right there the ghastly ghost of the *Citizen's United* ruling by the Supreme Court floated in the air, and the corruption of our national decision-making by rich people and giant corporations became clearer. "Perkins later said offstage that what he meant was that, with 50% of registered U.S. voters not paying taxes, 'we got ourselves into a mess.'" So, he suggested that the bottom 50% be deprived of the right to vote! The mess we have gotten into, it seems, is demonstrably due to the corrupt political duopoly system that already gives too much influence to rich people, not too little. Our beleaguered system also gives excessive influence to corporations, which are by nature amoral, being concerned mainly about short-term profits, NOT about the general welfare of the people, the greater good of humanity or the habitability of the planet. Corporations, of course, are legal entities that operate as tools for the distribution of corporate profits to the people who own equities -- and voila! -- proof positive: the top 1% owns over half of all stocks, bonds and mutual funds in the U.S.

Perkins also voiced an opinion that "The extreme progressivity of taxation is a form of persecution." He even indicated that he feared taxes would go higher and higher until there is no 1%. "It's an economic extinction, not a physical one," he added, circling back to a rash idea he infamously expressed in a letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2014, in which he claimed there is severe discrimination against America's rich that is like the terrible treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany. He asserted that the 1% faces a "rising tide of hatred" like that of Kristallnacht, a pogrom in 1938 that led to the eventual massacre of 6 million Jews by the Axis powers during World War II. What a pathological assessment, ghost of Perkins!

Tom Perkins later warily apologized for the hyperbole of this absurd comparison, but he still maintained his stance that rich people are persecuted, particularly in the city of San Francisco, where he saw a "demonization of the rich" in the Occupy movement in 2011 and 2012, and in on-going outrage over city gentrification and exorbitant real estate prices that have been driven up by thousands of people who live in the City and work in jobs in high tech Silicon Valley, 60 miles to the south.

A contrarian refutation of Perkins' bizarre perspective is close at hand. There were 66 billionaires in the U.S. in

1990, and now there are more than 725 in 2022. The richest 1% of Americans is definitely being buried -- under record amounts of wealth. If really rich people don't begin choking on their excess, their hubris in manipulating public policy to give themselves a near monopoly on receiving a grotesquely outsized proportion of the nation's profits could provoke Nemesis, the Goddess of Divine Retribution in Greek mythology, and her distant great-grandson God (in one of his angrily vindictive moods), and together they may wreak vengeance on the wealthy. And if the harsh poetic justice of divine retribution is not soon forthcoming, then it probably won't be long before revolutionary unrest arises that would prove to be much more severe than divine comeuppance. The ghost of wise Solon smiles knowingly, for such turmoil would be bad news for all, especially including the rich.

Let's open our minds. Tom Perkins was acting in arrogantly entitled ways that were stone deaf in his tone deafness. He seemed to harbor feelings of paranoia, persecution and a sense of jealously entitled deservedness of his good fortune. Once again I find greater credulity and probability in objective evidence-based opinions (woke?!) than in passionately aroused, blindly partisan and extremely self-serving beliefs. This is one reason that I enthusiastically encourage readers to give close consideration to the ideas in these soliloquies.

We are obviously missing the mark in the goal of making our nation fairer, overall healthier, and more secure. Since moneyed interests have such unwarranted and unjustifiable influence in our political system, Congress and the administration -- and the Supreme Court -- must all begin to give fairer, more sensible consideration to the interests of the vast majority of Americans, and not merely to the interests of the wealthiest people and the corporate vehicles that enable the concentration of wealth. As Thomas Paine observed in *Common Sense*: "Of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that every lived."

How Can So Many People Misunderstand So Much?

In *What's the Matter with Kansas*, Thomas Frank gave cogent instances of ways the "borderline criminality of capitalism itself" is harming people and our nation. He stated that this is "a condition that has rudely impressed itself on much of the world in the last few years." Since the time he wrote those words in 2004, this situation has gotten much worse. "Spectacular plunder" is involved, and "brutal economic processes". Labor unions in the private sector have been eviscerated, wages have been depressed, minimum wages are frozen, sensible regulations have been evaded, reforms have been prevented, rich people keep getting more big tax breaks, economic recessions resulted from both the deregulation of the banking and financial system and then the global pandemic, and destabilizing bubble economic policies have wreaked havoc on countless millions of people. In addition, the environment continues to be rashly polluted, and natural resources like fossil fuels and fresh water are being squandered at calamitously unsustainable rates.

At the same time, conservatives have been very dishonest with the American people. They have used the deluded echo chamber of Fox News and the rantings of conservative talk radio hosts and the spin of people in right-wing think tanks, and Trump loyalists in Congress, to fool many Americans into believing distorted versions of reality. This is glaringly apparent in the Big Lie about the outcome of the free and fair 2020 presidential election. Republicans have also been championing deceitful "movement conservatism" and pushing their crude ideologies fervently, so most people have skewed understandings of what the two political parties really represent. Odd interpretations about freedom and the greater good and true social responsibility drift in the biosphere.

Propagandists push popular misunderstandings about government spending and the huge national debt. Republicans repeatedly portrayed President Obama as a big spender of government funds. It comes as a big surprise to most people, therefore, that statistics reveal a completely different story. Barack Obama actually increased federal spending less than any president since Eisenhower, according to a *MarketWatch* analysis.

The fact of the matter is that the biggest *increases* in federal spending since 1980 have taken place during tenures of Republican presidents. The annualized growth in spending during Ronald Reagan's eight-year tenure averaged almost 7%; during George H.W. Bush's tenure it was over 5%; and during George W. Bush's eight years it was almost 8%. In surprising contrast, during Bill Clinton's eight years it was less than 4%; and during the first term of Barack Obama, it was less than 2%.

Likewise, despite propaganda to the contrary, the national debt has consistently increased more during times that Republicans controlled the Executive Branch than it has during periods with a Democrat as president. The reason for this is because of lower revenues that result from Republicans giving huge tax breaks to the people with the highest incomes, in tandem with lavish spending during the administrations of Republican presidents.

Economist Mike Kimel confirmed this fact, pointing out that former Democratic Presidents Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Lyndon Johnson, John F. Kennedy and Harry Truman all reduced public debt as a share of GDP while the last four Republican Presidents -- George W. Bush, George H.W. Bush, Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford -- all oversaw an increase in this ratio of our national indebtedness. Spending in Donald Trump's four years in office increased by more than 20%.

Surely we are better off living in "an evidence-based world" than in a world where disingenuous leaders "keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda," as George W. Bush bragged about doing. Statistics, of course, can be parsed in different ways to reach different conclusions, but we should all commit to working together to forge a more balanced approach to government spending and taxation, so that we stop undermining good solutions and avoiding making hard choices, and excessively mortgaging the future. One specific focus should be to ensure that the national debt stops growing faster than the rate of economic growth.

If we want a peaceable society, we need to make it a fairer one, not an increasingly unfair one with exaggerated disparities in economic and financial well-being, and health and personal security, between the Haves and the Have Nots. On the domestic front, as in international relations, the best way to harvest peace is to be found in sowing justice. A more sensible balance should be established between the freedoms and prerogatives of privileged individuals and the well-being of the entire community.

Where to Look for Positive New Direction

Years before the virus epidemic, I wrote that there are other "defining challenges of our age" than climate change -- "like the declining fortunes of the middle class and poor people, the irresponsible wastefulness of our system of materialistic consumerism, the rash squandering of resources, the deep dilemmas associated with human population growth, and tragedy-of-the-commons assaults on the environment."

To sensibly deal with these challenges, we need to look to the three types of social institutions that dominate our society: corporations, governments, and churches. All three of these categories of institutions are failing us today in times of increasingly desperate needs. This failure is occurring because all these institutions are vulnerable to a variety of influences that distort their true higher purposes.

Corporations and churches are extremely undemocratic institutions. They are led by small groups of people who wield dominating hierarchal authority. Since corporations are legally bound to narrow purposes of maximizing profits and limiting the liabilities of owners, most of the benefits of corporate activities go to shareholders and the people in top management positions. As a consequence, short shrift is given to employees, communities, the health of the environment, and society as a whole.

In the early years of the automobile industry, Henry Ford, who founded the Ford Motor Company, believed in the value of paying relatively high wages to his workers so that they would be able to afford to buy the high cost products his company was producing. His generosity in paying high wages to employees was ruled illegal as a result of a 1919 court case, *Dodge vs. Ford Motor Company*. The Michigan Supreme Court ruled in this case that a business corporation is organized mainly for the profit of its shareholders. Corporations, they judged, must give primary consideration to the interests (and dividends!) of shareholders. Any other motive, like paying workers generously, or acting ethically and responsibly toward workers and the environment, was ruled to be legally constrained by this obligation.

In recent years, curiously, the astronomical generosity of salaries and benefits for CEOs and people in top management has NOT been subjected to similar limitations. Power obviously undermines justice!

One result of judicial mandates for corporations to maximize profits for shareholders is that corporations are not only driven to improve their operations and products and services, but also to cut corners, circumvent common

sense regulations, externalize public health and environmental costs, indulge in unfair competitive practices, exploit non-productive "rent-seeking" advantages, evade taxes, cheat customers, invest in lobbying efforts to gain more subsidies and tax breaks, indulge in many schemes to avoid paying taxes, and support pork barrel spending and war profiteering. These things are undesirable from the perspective of the greater good!

Churches are even less democratic than corporations. The Catholic Church is headed by a Pope who is selected by about 124 cardinals (current number eligible to vote), almost all of whom are conservative old men. The Church's goals are so undemocratic that women are given completely inferior influence in the Church, and the official positions of religious authorities are dictated by inflexible doctrines, unevolved dogma, and male-dominion-oriented patriarchal supremacist policies. As a result, church establishments often collaborate with dominion-demanding political conservatives rather than liberal humanists, in a blatantly unchristian alliance.

Societies ruled by Islamic theocratic hierarchies, like those in Iran and Saudi Arabia, are even more sadly retrogressive and repressive. Pretty please, make reforms! As Albert Einstein astutely declared in 1901: "A foolish faith in authority is the greatest enemy of truth."

A new Pope was being chosen in 2013 as these words were first materializing in the interstices of my mind. The problems facing the troubled and stodgy old Catholic Church are legion, and most Americans regard Catholic bishops as rather out of touch on many issues. The Church should address the widespread evidence-based perception that it is a patriarchal institution riddled with discrimination, self-serving hypocrisy, intrigue, deceit, and obsession with money and power. It should begin to act as a more fair and accountable entity, rather than emulating an arrogant authoritarian monarchy. It should do this by ceasing to defend flawed understandings of evolutionary biological impulses, gender roles and outdated theological notions concerning human sexuality.

After Pope Francis was chosen to lead the church, he gave an Easter Sunday address in March 2013 in which he wisely deplored the "iniquitous exploitation of natural resources." In this regard, it would be wise to heed his advice. He indicated that social justice and protections of the environment would be hallmarks of his papacy, reflecting the ministry of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint who the new Pope adopted as his own. That was a good start to his reign! And HALLELUJAH for his climate change encyclical in 2015!

In September 2013, Pope Francis lamented: "The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules." He also said in the same interview: "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods." ... "We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel." Good call, Pope! The fragrance of the Gospel too oft manifests itself more like a putrid stench.

Mark Twain once made the cogent remark, "The church is always trying to get other people to reform; it might not be a bad idea to reform itself a little, by way of example." A favorite joke among people in Rome about the Vatican's reluctance to embrace reform is a quip about the Church's modus operandi: "Talk to me on Tuesday and I'll get back to you in 300 years." Ha!

The seven main areas in need of reform to refocus the Church on greater fairness, farsightedness and more inclusive visions of the moral good are:

- (1) To modernize the Church's attitudes toward birth control measures, for many compelling reasons that include minimizing the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and dealing effectively with problems like unwanted children, overpopulation, environmental degradation, shortages of food and water, and other issues related to the true quality of life;
- (2) To deal honestly, effectively, and fairly with priests and their victims in sexual abuse scandals, which have plagued the Church worldwide in recent years with children being molested by priests and such heinous wrongdoing being covered up by religious authorities, even including the two previous Popes.
- (3) To change Church rules that deny women the right to be ordained as priests, and allow women to have more important ecclesiastical roles in the Church;
- (4) To address a steep decline in the number of priests by overturning the Vatican's odd 1,500-year-old ban on priests being married;

- (5) To change the Church's official discriminatory and denunciatory tune against gay people;
- (6) To put the Vatican's organizational structure in more open and accountable order, and to thereby deal with financial and governance scandals that have been bedeviling the Church; and,
- (7) To emphasize more persistent and farsighted messages to the faithful flock about the importance of social justice, political and social fairness, resource conservation and protections of Earth's environment.

Since religious establishments and corporate entities are so distinctly undemocratic, our main hope for fairer representation in decision-making is to be found with governments. All governments tend to be corrupted by the powerful influence of large corporations and religious establishments, and by the distorting influence of vested interest groups, but progressive elements still have significant sway, and our federal government is still nominally ruled by a fairness-oriented Constitution and Bill of Rights, and precedents of established laws that have evolved over the past two centuries.

We should demand that our representatives in government demonstrate progressive leadership in dealing with the big issues that confront us: environmental protections and peaceful coexistence on the global scene, and guaranteed personal liberties, improved public education, fairness in the strife between rich people and all others, expanded rights to self-determination for women, and eminently reasonable compromises in all conflicts between capital and labor. Progressive evangelicals, please help!

An Audience with the Pope

The Latin root of the word religion is *religio*, meaning to *bond together*. Humanity has an overarching need to bond together in a far-reaching and conscientious devotion to a more responsible stewardship of creation. This need is growing steadily, along with increasing human numbers and intensifying demands on resources and ecosystem services and the "carbon sink capacity" of the biosphere. All religions should strive for a common bond of peaceful coexistence by coming together to give higher priority to helping satisfy this transcendent obligation. We should become downright evangelical or practically puritanical in this duty, in the sense of seeking to judiciously inspire this ultimate righteous moral code for our kind as a whole in the long term.

Pope Francis shocked religious conservatives early in his tenure when he was asked about homosexuals and responded, "Who am I to judge?" I'm glad you asked, Pope Francis! You are the powerful leader of an ossified behemoth institution that has enormous influence on people's conceptions of right and wrong, and you are dealing with a giant hairball of institutional inertia in the Catholic Church hierarchy. This stodgy stasis is sadly preventing the faithful from evolving a more positive and inclusive morality. How ironic that *catholic* means "all-embracing"! Your Church, Pope, is clinging to archaic dogmatic canons too often, and dishonorably claiming they are absolute truths that reflect God's will. The Church is also continuing to deny the biggest picture understandings ever conceived about the evolution of life on Earth. It should rightly become a stronger force for fairer dealings and inclusiveness, mitigating conflicts between people, especially ones that result in violence.

It is good to see you shaking up conservatives a little, Pope Francis, by shifting your emphasis away from "small-minded rules", but that is not enough. Stop pretending that Church teachings on big issues like contraception, abortion, homosexuality and the impossibility of ordaining women as priests are matters of God's will, rather than Church doctrine defined and imposed by extremely inequitable power-abusing male religious authorities.

Attention to the Here and Now

The shock-engendering news that Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died suddenly on February 13, 2016 really shook up presidential primary campaigns, for a decision then had to be made about his replacement. The news reminded me of a surprising story about Justice Scalia that had surfaced after an interview with him appeared in *New York Magazine*. Scalia said he believed in heaven, hell and the devil. The devil? "Yeah, he's a real person. Hey, c'mon, that's standard Catholic doctrine! Every Catholic believes that."

Frankly, not every Catholic believes that. In fact, even Pope John Paul II once said that heaven is not a real place up in the sky, and that hell is not a physical place either. Antonin Scalia, however, was a Biblical literalist who believed otherwise, and he seemed to have been willing to consign whole groups of people to worsen fates here on Earth if they did not conform to his judgmental beliefs, personal prejudices and ideological certitudes. This makes

a shrewd observation by the pragmatic philosopher William James ring with persuasive truth: "A great number of people think that they are thinking, when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

It is disturbing to find out that top federal judicial officials have made important decisions affecting millions of people's lives in conformity with dogmatic religious beliefs. It is the prerogative of Scalia to have believed in literal interpretations of the Bible, since everyone in our democracy has the freedom to believe whatever they like. But when he allowed his judicial opinions to be informed by strictly constricted personal religious beliefs, like those related to women's rights, minority rights and gay rights, an overarching injustice resulted. "It is both frightening and disconcerting that a Supreme Court Justice, sworn to uphold the U.S. Constitution, has so blatantly ignored the fact that our constitution is secular and not religious," said one observer.

Aye, there's the rub! A grave form of potential evil is associated with belief systems that proclaim an absolute certainty that there is an afterlife where believers, by dutifully believing, will be rewarded with eternal existence in a "Heaven" place of rapturous and sublime beauty and ease -- but non-believers, by not believing, will deserve to be condemned to eternity in a "Hell" place of fiery and tortuous suffering and anguish. It is evil because condemning others to a hellish afterlife is strongly correlated to a radically more reprehensible attitude of condemning them to discriminatory injustices in the here and now.

Abraham Lincoln made a succinct point: "The true rule, in determining to embrace, or reject any thing, is not whether it have any evil in it; but whether it have more of evil, than of good."

A literal belief that a Devil exists to bedevil "sinners" and non-believers can be a convenient receptacle for harshly judgmental prejudices, and such a belief can become evil incarnate by motivating fundamentalist believers to demonize others or subject them to severe criticism, ostracism, discrimination, domestic violence, hate, or even Inquisitions, torture, murder or genocide -- or terrorist attacks and suicide bombings.

In one of the world's most famous myths, Faust made a deal with the Devil in which he would gain all knowledge of the physical world, and power over it, but he had to pay the Devil with his soul for this privilege. In the original myth, Faust goes to Hell at the end, but in a later version, the playwright Goethe granted him redemption. George Lucas explored a similar theme to Goethe's in his Star Wars trilogy, and it looms large in our imaginations. Will technology save us, or destroy us? "Our computers, our tools, our machines are not enough," says Bill Moyers. "We have to rely on our intuition, our true being."

Literal interpretations of Holy Books can prove to be terminal to the purpose, meaning and emotional power of the generative myths they contain. Contemplate, for instance, the personal experience of Reza Aslan, author of *Zealot, The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*: "The bedrock of evangelical Christianity, at least as it was taught to me, is the unconditional belief that every word of the Bible is God-breathed and true, literal and inerrant. The sudden realization that this belief is patently and irrefutably false, that the Bible is replete with the most blatant and obvious errors and contradictions -- just as one would expect from a document written by hundreds of hands across thousands of years -- left me confused and spiritually unmoored. And so, like many people in my situation, I angrily discarded my faith as if it were a costly forgery I had been duped into buying."

There is a good answer to the late Rodney King's conciliatory question, "Can't we all just get along?" YES, WE CAN! We could get along a lot better by honoring the virtuous ethic of reciprocity epitomized by the Golden Rule. This would be a much better guiding light for humanity than narrowly parochial dogmas, especially in light of the fact that the world is becoming increasingly crowded and interconnected -- and the need is growing to find good ways to prevent conflicts, and to resolve ones that arise.

"When white missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land."

--- Desmond Tutu

A Goal of Overriding Importance

Recall that Dick Cheney infamously declared in 2002, "Reagan proved deficits don't matter." This is one of the most ridiculous statements ever uttered. Cheney made this claim as a convenient rationalization for borrowing huge sums of money to finance trillion-dollar tax cuts and big increases in military spending. We should not forget

Cheney's blatant conflicts of interest in this doctrine, because it contributed significantly to the profitability of the oilfield services company Halliburton and its subsidiaries -- those same corporate entities that Cheney had led as CEO just prior to his selecting himself to be Vice President under George W. Bush.

Abraham Lincoln lent a sensational perspective to such abuses of power when he stated: "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

If there are apparent good grounds for suspecting a man's character, like his manifesting rigidly retrogressive conservatism, let's choose NOT to give him power! It is exceedingly unfair and socially irresponsible to finance wasteful priorities by borrowing money from every future taxpayer. "No need to pay as we go" chimed the Republican chorus when George W. Bush was president, as they repeatedly rubber-stamped increases in the U.S. debt ceiling to accommodate the mounting tsunami of deficit spending. They even created a new entitlement program for prescription drugs that has been financed by well over \$1 trillion in borrowed money since 2003, and they allowed gigantic drug companies to write the specific provisions of this sorry legislation so that profits on drug sales would be maximized -- at public expense. This necessarily meant, of course, that the deficit-financed cost of the program would be *a whole lot higher to taxpayers than it should be.*

Hey, cost cutters, this should be easy! Let's defy the profit-maximizing Big Pharmaceutical lobby for a change, and demand that every one of our political representatives unanimously supports negotiating volume discounts and new provisions to require less expensive generic drugs for Medicare recipients, where available.

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 to 2011, made a much more likely honest statement in 2010 than Dick Cheney's when he said: "Our national debt is our biggest national security threat." Yikes! It is a stunning possibility that the failure to adequately control deficit spending may be a bigger threat to us than all those terrorists we've misguidedly been spending trillions of dollars to defeat and antagonize and drop bombs on, from drones above. It is foolish to fight endless hyper-costly wars over the threat of terrorism when the cost itself contributes to bigger risks of future widespread hardships.

Admiral Mullen was basically saying it would be a better investment in a safer future to work together in more effective ways to prevent excessive indulgences in the shortsighted expediency of deficit financing every year, for questionable purposes, year after year after year. Then, when an emergency arrives, like the health and economic pandemic cataclysm that added \$3 trillion in one fell swoop, would have been less fiscally risk-laden.

Instead of insensibly requiring across-the-board "sequestration cuts", as Congress did in early 2013, we would have been better off to target spending cuts more specifically and intelligently. We should elect much better managers, and tell the ones we've got to cut government spending by reducing wantonly wasteful levels of poorly controlled spending, especially on the military. Let's bring home a good number of the over 170,000 active-duty personnel stationed in Germany, Japan and nearly 150 other nations abroad. And let us collectively resolve not to make military invasions and occupations of other countries. This would help us achieve the salutary goal of reducing bloated military spending. With respect to foreign relations, let's commit more funds -- like an amount equal to 5% of the military budget -- to helping other peoples make their societies healthier and safer. And, in general, let's act as a better neighbor on the world stage. Policies that create mutual security are the key!

The Institute for Policy Studies once produced a report that outlined significant ways to save about \$200 billion per year by controlling Pentagon spending in sensible ways. That's big money! For details, see their online report titled *We're Not Broke: A Commonsense Guide to Avoiding the Fiscal Swindle while Making the United States more Equitable, Green, and Secure.*

Another Shout Out to Proper Accounting

Federal and state governments often use odd accounting gimmicks to avoid making difficult decisions and smart trade-offs. The most significant of such accounting gimmicks is the expediency of borrowing huge sums of money to avoid making more socially responsible budgetary choices. Such shortsighted schemes allow costs to be externalized onto others. Governments often allow businesses to use accounting gimmicks and abuse the power of their unwarranted influence to maximize their own selfish benefits. It would be more sensible to use the concept of "full cost accounting" to create societies that are more socially, fiscally and environmentally responsible. It

would be wiser to make our tax policies more progressively structured, and to act courageously to curtail the unfair influences that corrupt our political system. These steps would help ensure the common good and leave a fairer legacy of eco-sanity to people in future years.

Here's a surprising thing: a fair measure of salvation may be found in proper accounting! Such proactive planning makes more sense than to passively believe in a judgmental and punitive God who will supposedly give us salvation only if we cling blindly to a belief in 'His' existence, as revealed by some "holy scripture"!

I invite readers to imagine this modern version of *Common Sense* as encompassing a balanced blend of reason, logic and evidence-based probability, on the one hand, and foresight, passionate caring and spiritual wisdom, on the other. Let salvation and healing -- physical, moral and spiritual -- be the underlying motive for this visionary new version of *Common Sense*. Let us see that economic well-being cannot be achieved in the long run without championing conservation initiatives and adequate protections of the environmental commons.

Shall We Heed the WARNING Signs?

Some say that the U.S. and the world are destined to suffer a harsh economic depression in the next decade because of rash increases in government debt that have been incurred so far this century. These people make convincing arguments, especially after the desperate borrowings required due to the calamitous pandemic. After all, the U.S. national debt more than quadrupled in the two decades from 2001 through 2021, increasing from less than \$6 trillion to \$30 trillion. To have allowed such a risky increase in debt is rashly irresponsible.

Total interest expense on this debt will carve out an increasing percentage of all federal budgets in future years. This cost exceeded \$400 billion every year since 2005, and with high interest rates last year, totaled \$875 billion. This will cause more intense conflicts in the future over budget priorities, and between our national needs and demands of special interest groups. And since the average age of Americans continues a trend of long-term demographic increase, the costs of our social safety net will inexorably climb, and we would be in much better financial condition if we were not already overly burdened with enormous debt.

Baby boomers are reaching retirement age in large numbers, so costs of total benefits for seniors is growing rapidly, and these entitlement costs are causing a budget squeeze on nearly every other category of spending. "The foot is on the accelerator with entitlement programs, and it's on the brakes on investments," said Jim Kessler, vice-president of Third Way, a centrist Democratic think tank, several years ago. "And this country needs more investments." Public investments are being limited in vital things like education, infrastructure, research and development, and other areas that tend to nurture future prosperity. To advance progressive priorities like environmental protections, improved public education, and clean energy research and policy implementation, we need to put sensible cost controls and fair-minded entitlement reforms into effect.

Interest expense on the national debt is a stealth tax on all taxpayers in future years. As the size of this real tax increases with increases in the national debt -- especially with the current rapid increases in interest rates in 2022 from their historic lows -- this cost will constrict future options for lower tax rates or enough spending to make our country fairer, more secure and more stable. We definitely could make a much better plan than the current status quo or devious and irresponsible Trump Republican backwards impulses, if we really wanted to ensure a more salubrious collective fate! I say, "We do; and let's just do it!"

Debt Can Be a Form of Bondage, and Hard Rock Music Is Blaring in the Background at the Moment

Debt can become a deep personal scourge in a borrower's life. The specific condition of "debt bondage" afflicts millions of people. Unscrupulous lenders use repayment requirements as a means of basically enslaving people and making them fulfill a role similar to that of serfs in feudal times, or of indentured servants in Colonial America, or of inmates in debtor's prisons of old.

Because the ruling political class in the U.S. has collectively failed to limit deficit spending, and all taxpayers in every future year are being saddled with enormous burdens of debt and interest expense obligations, we are unfairly imposing a form of "intergenerational bondage" that will severely constrain options of people in the future to address economic, public health, social and environmental problems.

Today, student loan debt in the U.S. has reached a crushing total of more than \$1.7 trillion. This amount is in excess of the total debt on credit cards or auto loans. A threat of massive student loan defaults exists, and is creating "a systemic risk as serious as the bank failures that brought the U.S. economy to the brink of collapse in 2008," according to Project Uncensored. We should seek fair ways to reduce such risks, and make education much more affordable.

The interest rate on federal student loans for undergraduate college students was increased from 3.76% to 4.45% in July 2017, and to 4.99% for 2022-2023. High rates on student loan debt are outrageous, considering that huge corporate banks have been getting money from the Federal Reserve at very low rates of less than 1% for many years. We should be investing in young people, not in maximizing profits made by private banks. Students shouldn't be treated as tough-luck pawns in a game of private profit-making that makes young people too small to matter.

Before the pandemic, I observed, "A harsh economic depression caused by a debt crisis would have catastrophic impacts on billions of people around the world. All Americans should give consideration to this possibility, and be willing to modify their habits a little, and shift their beliefs, and share in a small sacrifice of some of their short-term-oriented self-interested goals to prevent this eventuality. This would represent the greater good for all. European countries, mired in similar fiscal problems, should find better ways to manage their debts, and to balance austerity measures with more fair-minded concessions by people who are well off and can easily contribute to greater general well-being."

All peoples should rise up and demand that leaders worldwide enact national policies that are more fiscally sound and socially fair. This would be one of the best ways to mitigate the growing intensity of conflicts in the world. The wise Athenian statesman Solon, one of my heroes, would have agreed. Such changes might even prove to be one of the best ways to create more peaceable and stronger democratic societies.

Daunting problems face us all, collectively, so together we need to decide how to best manage our local and national affairs. The word "collaboration" reverberates from a tree smoldering on steep slopes of a mountain resembling Nepal's beautiful Ama Dablam, and the sounds of a rousing symphony echo among the mountain peaks. And resounding echoes of Henry Kissinger's ineffable words are heard: "The absence of alternatives clears the mind marvelously."

Effective incentives should be instituted that would encourage all peoples of the world to modify their habits a little bit, and shift their beliefs, and share in a small sacrifice in order to achieve an eventuality that has rosier implications than current ominous trends portend. Robert Reich provocatively pointed out in *Supercapitalism* that consumers and investors have goals that conflict, even within themselves, with goals more consistent with the common good. Investors should therefore be amenable to new requirements for a small percentage to be added to all transactions to fund social insurance policies to finance efforts to help achieve good citizen goals.

The wealthiest 2% of people in the world own more than 50% of the world's wealth, and they tend to prefer shortsighted "austerity recessions" to alternatives that require them to invest a bit more of their incomes in social insurance that serves to help people and mitigate social unrest. Rich folks should be eager to buy relatively inexpensive social insurance by supporting initiatives that create an affordable social safety net. This is common sense. The most salient of these initiatives would be a proposed new system of taxation that is more steeply graduated, assessing higher levels of tax on the highest levels of earnings. Many rich people stubbornly insist that the federal government should maintain the current low tax rates, but this stance substantially increases potentials for a costly economic downturn and risks of more intense civil conflicts.

Recollecting the old song by the Tubes, *What Do You Want from Life*, I figured that the best idea for us might be to formulate a foolproof plan -- and not just to expend greater efforts to cook up "an airtight alibi".

Evaluating Values

Two competing visions are battling for ascendancy in our country. One side says we need to cut taxes on the highest income earners and on corporations. Such policies serve to promote the further enrichment of the rich and impoverishment of the poor. People who promote such policies insist that austerity measures should be imposed on the majority of the American people. A proper understanding of Keynesian economics, however, tells us

that the time for government austerity measures is when the economy is expanding, not when it is being buffeted by recessionary forces. Republicans generally push for cutting taxes on the rich and enacting on-your-own sink-or-swim economic plans. They get away with this by deviously calling for "trickle-down" economic plans.

The other side says that the greater economic well-being of our nation can be achieved only by taking steps to ensure that prosperity is shared more broadly, so that millions of American workers are a bit more financially secure and have more money to spend. It is these workers, after all, whose increases in productivity in the past four decades have helped generate large increases in wealth. These are the working people who have seen little sharing of the fruits of their improved labor productivity since Ronald Reagan.

Former President Obama and President Biden more-or-less represent this more progressive side. They give sensible recognition to the idea that we would be better off to strike a fairer balance between the privileges of well-heeled individuals and the well-being of our communities, and between the power of narrowly-focused special interest groups and the power of the people. The domination of our national decision-making by entrenched factions is the most serious factor distorting our national priorities.

The majority of people in the world are going to need to be less desperately insecure for us to have more stable and sustainable societies. Extreme degrees of inequality cause widespread hardships, so they are dangerous. We need to make big changes in economic structures, and that is going to cost a lot, and everyone is going to be responsible for contributing to higher costs. A fairer distribution of wealth in the world is needed to help all people pay the coming higher costs of smart "green taxes" and cost-internalizing assessments.

Incentives, it is well known, are the fairest and most effective means to achieve socially desirable ends. Smart incentives and disincentives are the best way to influence people's behaviors because they are not only quite effective, but also because they are most consistent with various freedoms of choice.

Again, we see that the history of our great nation has been one of a progressive unfolding of increasing fairness that has unsteadily moved us closer to actualizing Enlightenment Era ideals embraced by our Founders. Whenever an existential threat has been on the verge of destroying our great experiment in representative democracy, we have chosen remedial reforms. The best example of this was when wealthy people were forced to agree to a fairer social compact after the Depression of the 1930s began. Salubrious reforms ushered in 40 years of more fairly shared prosperity through a variety of New Deal initiatives that helped poor people and those in the middle class. But then came the Reagan Revolution, and rich people once again grabbed the upper hand. Since then, they have been abusing the power of their undue influence to get an ever-bigger proportion of the benefits of our economic system for themselves. In the process, the fortunes of poor people and the middle class have been dramatically diminished.

"These capitalists generally act harmoniously and in concert to fleece the people, and now that they have got into a quarrel with themselves, we are called upon to appropriate the people's money to settle the quarrel."

--- Abraham Lincoln's "First Reported Speech", January 1837

American voters made an important choice in reelecting President Obama in the 2012 elections, and in electing progressive Elizabeth Warren as Senator from Massachusetts -- and in rejecting extreme conservatives like Todd Akin, Richard Mourdock and Allen West. At the time I was hopeful that this outcome would help us collaborate together better on national policies and priorities to make sure they are more consonant with the marvelously broad-minded principles of our Founders, as stated in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution -- to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." But hyper-divisive partisan politicians gained Trumpian sway from 2017 through 2021, and the need is growing to throw "conservatives" out of office because of their efforts to subvert elections and mercilessly exploit narrow advantages for selfish purposes.

On the Desirability of an Effective Opposition Political Party

A strong opposition party should provide a healthy balance in our two-party political system, and it is especially vital to the common good. But the minority party must be a sensible party, not a "stupid party" or a "party of no" that stubbornly obstructs progress and tries to make the President fail, as Republicans did while Barack Obama

was in office, and again now that Joe Biden is president. Bobby Jindal, Republican Governor of Louisiana from 2008 until 2016, urged Republicans in the aftermath of the 2012 elections to reject "dumbed-down conservatism" and to "stop being the stupid party". He said Republicans should "stop reducing everything to mindless slogans", and sensibly declared, "We cannot be, we must not be, the party that simply protects the rich so they get to keep their toys." This seemed like good advice, but many in the GOP chose -- and continue to choose -- to ignore it. To protect the rich, and benefit from this scheme is basically their top priority.

If a doctor misunderstands a medical problem and focuses attention on the wrong issues, the prescriptions he or she makes can be harmful. Likewise, when Republicans focus on wrong-headed priorities, their prescriptions can resemble quackery, and they can cause much harm to the populace.

Economist Paul Krugman stated some years ago when the U.S. economy was stagnant and unemployment was high that this was a technical problem that should be solved through better organization, coordination and right action. Krugman believes we should solve such problems in equitable ways to get the economy to resume healthier growth. These ideas, like others in his book *End This Depression Now!*, should be fairly analyzed, and consistent actions should be taken. The global pandemic is teaching us valuable lessons; Let's learn them.

Republicans should reject being the party of unthinking faith and denials of expert understandings. They should stop dogmatically denying the dangers and future costs associated with pandemic diseases, and a warming planet and a changing climate. They should accept progressive reforms of the tax code, and contribute to making sure that comprehensive immigration reforms are enacted. They should allow more scientists and engineers to come to the U.S. on H-1B visas, since such visas are integral to the success of a transformative high-tech economy. And they should stop undermining the rights and dignity of women and gay people, and cease unprecedented obstruction of adaptive laws. Evolve, guys!

Scapegoating in All Its Ugliness

A "scapegoat theory of intergroup conflict" provides an explanation for the correlation between times of relative economic despair and increases in prejudice and violence toward "out groups". This theory helps explain the genocidal Holocaust slaughter of 6 million Jews during World War II. Jewish people were scapegoated as convenient to blame for the humiliation Germany had suffered in being defeated in the First World War, and for the subsequent huge reparations that Germans were required to pay. These obligations contributed to a disastrous period of hyperinflation during the 1920s, when the cost of a loaf of bread in Germany went from 1 Deutsche Mark in 1918 to 10 Marks in 1920 to 10,000 Marks at the end of 1922 to one trillion Marks by 1924. Just try to imagine how inflation like that might affect a nation's people!

There is, likewise, much hostility toward gay people, who are often blamed and scapegoated in today's world. This hostility seems to be an unconscious psychological defense mechanism like *displacement* or *projection* that is exhibited by those who fan the flames of prejudice. Pathetically, reactionary groups of people are often well funded and tend to be vehement in their ideologies. They also seem to be deficient in the accuracy of their comprehension and understanding. To create dynamic and healthier and fairer societies, it would be best to eschew Biblical literalism and narrow dogmatism and vituperative Trumpian antagonisms.

I believe in the relative greater virtue and social good of progressive ideas compared to conservative ideas. Follow this line of thought closely. One of the core understandings expressed in these writings is that religious fundamentalism is a big danger because it engenders so much conflict. Exceedingly large costs related to a military war against terrorists make it clear that it would be better for everyone if moderate voices and fairer policies prevailed in world affairs. The idea of religious freedom was a founding principle of our nation, and Golden Rule ethics naturally imply no one should be able to force their parochial beliefs on others.

Contemplate how different the views are of people who believe in orthodox religious ideas, compared to more enlightened worldviews. Orthodox Christians believe the highest virtue is obedience to ecclesiastical authority. More enlightened folks believe that insightful personal understanding and ethical right action are higher virtues. Orthodox Christians think that "Satan" is the source of all evil, while more enlightened folks believe that ignorance, selfishness and intolerance of others are primary causes of much unnecessary suffering. And, Orthodox

Christians believe the Bible is literal and historical, while more enlightened people see this 'Holy Book' as a mythical story that provides guidance through parables and poetic metaphor, as well as commandments.

Orthodox Christians believe that Eve was the first woman on Earth, and that she is the cause of original sin, and that humanity is contaminated by sin. More enlightened believers see Eve as a seeker of knowledge who was the first saint, and that humanity is a spark of the divine. Orthodox believers see blessings and grace as arising from sacraments handed down by religious authorities. Those who are more enlightened see blessings and grace as arising from inner awakening and self-knowledge and generosity of spirit. Orthodox believers tend to see Jesus as the literal Son of God and savior of mankind, while more enlightened perspectives regard Jesus as an archetype and teacher that dwells within each person. Those who cling to orthodox views think salvation can come only through faith, while the more enlightened see salvation as coming from "all-embracing" understanding.

Imagine how distinct a contrast these worldviews are, and how different a society would be that adheres to expansive enlightened views, compared to societies that hew to narrower dogmas.

An Aside on the Issue of Immigration

One of the most coldly calculating and divisive strategies used by bombastic demagogues like Donald Trump and far right politicians is to gain power by exploiting people's fears and prejudices, and by provoking intolerance and stoking hate. Trump is a media huckster who succeeded by being comically snarky and smirky on camera and smugly insulting on Twitter. While his unreal reality-show antics and snide insults helped propel him to becoming the leader of the most powerful country in the world, the toxic tenor he has interjected into the ranks of the Republican Party is cringe-inducing and dangerous, and he represents risky commitments to nationalistic white supremacy and international trade wars and regressive changes in taxation. His obtuse narcissism and macho aggression was wrongheaded on the international stage, and at home his rule proved to be antithetical to the freedom of the press, women's reproductive rights, and hopes for climate action and environmental protections.

"It was miraculous. It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all. It merely required no character."

--- Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

Aided by the Trump tornado, today's Republicans are taking an exceptionally hard-line stance on immigration that contrasts unfavorably with the more admirable position expressed by Ronald Reagan in his farewell address from the White House in 1989. Reagan referred to John Winthrop's journey to the United States, the English Puritan who imagined America as a "city upon a hill", and described Winthrop's idea of a "shining city" as one that was "teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace." He added, "If there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here."

In expressing their strong stances against young Dreamer residents of the U.S. and immigration "amnesty" and allowing refugees into the States, today's hard-right Republicans are launching fusillades against "political correctness", and are rationalizing blatant racism and discrimination. In doing so, they are tortuously twisting their rhetoric to justify blaming and scapegoating non-whites and people of other faiths, and are demonstrating intolerant religious antagonism.

The pathological strategy of today's Republican politicians to exploit anxieties and fears of the American people to gain power is, in effect, preying on their susceptibilities and vulnerabilities. One pathetic outcome is that the best interests of the vast majority of Americans are poorly represented in our politics. This, it seems obvious, is due to the fact that our political system has been corrupted by Big Money and the Supreme Court's narrow ruling that moneyed interests can use their money with few limits. This is a good reason why our system can accurately be said to be one of legalized institutional bribery. We really need to enact new laws, and Move to Amend the Constitution to once again give our democratic republic an honorably fair form of governance.

Gambling in the Bet Situation

We exist in a "Bet Situation", as described by the 17th century French scientist Blaise Pascal. First, we are inextricably involved in the game. Second, there are many uncertainties, and third, it is important to us in our own lives, and to our fellow human beings, that we make decisions that are more conscious, conscientious, and socially responsible with regard to a variety of important categories of bets we are collectively making.

One of the most significant gambles we make is to suppose that resource limitations don't matter because technology will save us by finding replacements for resources as we use them up. Resource conservation is a much smarter plan than such rationalizations of wasteful usages. It is also true that innovation is crucial to our adapting in the future, and many technological advances are going to be needed to satisfy our growing needs for food, fresh water and energy, and to prevent or mitigate problems associated with a destabilized climate and increasing crowds of human beings. Advances in technology can also have deleterious impacts. As an instance, they can be a cause of wide-ranging problems like much more effective ways of killing large numbers of people.

It would be a clearly smarter plan to place some of our bets on a "no-regrets" approach that would result in less rash gambles about whether or not technology will indeed save us. By making such bets, we would sensibly act to conserve natural resources like fossil fuels, crucial minerals, topsoil and fresh water, and we would help protect the vital biological systems found in tropical rainforests, old-growth temperate forests, unpolluted wetlands, mangrove nurseries, free-flowing streams, river deltas, healthy coral reefs and sustainable ocean fisheries.

The smartest course of action, in other words, is to place our bets on understandings that are most accurate! Someday, check out Chapter 38 of *Comprehensive Global Perspective* online for a summary the 14 principal gambles we are collectively making, along with illuminating ideas on the most sensible bets we should be taking.

The exciting story of the genesis and evolution of innovative industries in famous Silicon Valley provides us with valuable insights and good lessons. Steve Jobs, one of the greatest innovators in world history, was known for encouraging people to "Think Different", and to work to embrace life, "change it, improve it, and make your mark upon it." Silicon Valley became fertile grounds for innovation because it had a concentration of really smart scientists and engineers in the Bay Area of Northern California. People there cultivated an attitude of open-mindedness and a willingness to question conventional wisdom. It was also fortuitous that Silicon Valley was far away from the overly regimented and stifling hierarchy of traditional big businesses back east.

The then-new Venture Capital industry played a vital role in providing necessary financing to creative enterprises in Silicon Valley. Venture capitalists provided risk capital and also helped assemble brilliant people and promote new technologies and provide organizational guidance and oversight.

Gordon MacKenzie, an ombudsman who worked at Hallmark Cards for 30 years, provides readers with some provocative insights in his book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*. McKenzie shares the story of his own professional evolution, "together with lessons on awakening and fostering creative genius." He recommended that people create a proper distance from the tangled and impenetrable mass of rules and bureaucracy and traditions that exercise an inexorably stultifying pull in stodgy organizations. A good balance between adequate structure and freewheeling latitude is healthy on many levels.

Silicon Valley gained great success after the Soviet Union shocked people in the U.S. by launching Sputnik, mankind's first satellite, into orbit in 1957. Realizing the need for technological innovation in electronics and rocket science propulsion and aerospace engineering, President Dwight Eisenhower soon thereafter created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Then, in 1961, President John Kennedy committed the nation to putting a man on the Moon within a decade, and we proudly did so in July 1969. Visionary commitments, good organization, and flexibility in approach can help us accomplish great goals.

A "Rent-Seeking" Rip-Off

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, campaigning in Iowa in 2011, smugly declared, "Corporations are people, my friend". I have always felt strong disagreement with the premise that corporations deserve to be given the full rights in courts of law that are constitutionally assured to real people. Too many abuses of power have been made using rationalizations like the one that says the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees corporate entities the same rights as individuals of Due Process and Equal Protection.

Drastic increases in corporate power are anti-democratic. Republicans can accurately be seen as representing government of business interests, by corporations and corrupt politicians, and for rich people. One of the most detrimental aspects of Mitt Romney's proposals was the idea that we should give more power to big corporations. When he asserted that corporations are people, it begged an important question: if huge multinational corporations are people, then exactly what kind of people are they?

Professor Joel Bakan answered this question in his provocative book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, and in the thought-provoking film *The Corporation*. He found that big corporations all-too-often fit the profile of a "psychopathic person", as judged by criteria in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Corporations often show a reckless disregard for the safety of others, a callous unconcern for the feelings of workers and consumers, and a pathetic incapacity to experience guilt. Tellingly, they also often demonstrate an eagerness to deceive people through persuasive marketing and engage in cost-externalizing gambits oriented toward making bigger profits by foisting costs onto society. And they frequently fail to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior. They definitely do not resemble either good friends or considerate neighbors.

It is compelling to consider this fact that corporations all too often act in ways that resemble behaviors exhibited by psychopathic individuals. The inescapable conclusion is that we should not give corporations the same legal rights as real people. When the Supreme Court issued its narrow 5-4 ruling on the *Citizens United* case, it gave rich people and corporate interests the right to subvert our democracy by spending ever larger amounts of money on propaganda and lobbying so they can gain more power. This spending has had the negative effect of helping politicians realize their hubristic self-serving plans to wield excessive power over the people.

Another way that corporations play hardball with city, county, state and federal governments is by demanding that they be given a variety of free services, tax incentives, property tax abatements, cash grants, loans, sales tax breaks, and income tax credits and exemptions. These perks cost taxpayers tens of billions of dollars every year. These overly generous provisions divert money from public education and other important priorities, and force states and municipalities to cut public services or raise taxes. Laura Reese, director of the Global Urban Studies Program at Michigan State University, advises local governments to invest in local residents through education and training rather than by giving big incentives to companies, where it is harder to pick winners. Such strategies would be smarter development priorities!

Conservatives want corporations to make bigger bottom line profits, so they love cheap labor, and thus oppose fairer treatment of women and equal pay. Women are a disproportionately large component of the middle class and working poor, so extreme conservative positions significantly undermine the hopes and well-being of these crucial segments of society. And females make up about two-thirds of people who earn minimum wages, so opposition to increases in this wage has a direct negative affect on women. The history of a minimum wage requirement is an interesting one. It was started in 1938 during the Depression, and reached its highest real value (adjusted for inflation) in 1968. Since then, its value has gone down by about one third, and minimum wages have never been enough to keep a family above poverty level with only one family member working.

Borderline Criminality

Being open-minded, I've given consideration to alternate points of view. Maybe we *should* treat corporations like persons -- especially when it comes to socially responsible behavior. Imagine a group of felons walking into 10,000 of Texas-based 7-Eleven's convenience stores and stealing the entire inventory of every one of them, and then being caught red-handed -- but NOT being required to pay any penalty or give back any of the stolen merchandise. Absolutely preposterous, right?

This is basically what happened with the biotech firm Amgen. The company had just been fined \$612 million in December 2012 for criminally defrauding the Medicare program by manipulating prices and giving kickbacks. Despite having cheated taxpayers with these illegal schemes, lobbyists for Amgen managed just two weeks later to slip an obscure provision into the legislation that allayed the "fiscal cliff crisis". When the Senate passed the American Taxpayer Relief Act in the early morning hours of January 1, 2013, Congress rewarded Amgen with a two-year delay in Medicare price restraints on Sensipar, the company's kidney dialysis drug. This gave Amgen a big

benefit that will cost American taxpayers an estimated \$500 million -- an amount equivalent to the entire inventory of all 10,000 of those 7-Eleven's. Amgen was caught red-handed, but was nevertheless given a big windfall that will result from this lobbyist shenanigan.

In a banana republic, we would call this a sensational instance of political corruption. But in the United States, this is business as usual. It is just one of many of the undesirable results of allowing corporations to retain large numbers of lobbyists to gain unfair advantages -- and of allowing big businesses and rich people to corrupt our politics by making outsized political donations to our representatives.

The Impact of Illegitimate Partisans on the Supreme Court

Most consequential of all for the Republican crusade to gain power was their strategy to stack the Supreme Court with proponents of corporate power and privilege like Samuel Alito, and highly partisan conservatives like Clarence Thomas, and ideological stalwarts like the late Antonin Scalia, and political partisans like Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh and the religious fundamentalist Amy Coney Barrett. They want to do this so that their anti-democratic influence will be perpetuated for generations rather than merely in the short run, when their arrogance of power will be slapped down by voters angry at seeing exactly what the real impacts are, concealed behind all the bombast, deceit, devious blame-shifting, flag-waving rhetoric and bad prescriptions.

After having heard that Justice Antonin Scalia's had died suddenly in February 2016, the thought occurred to me, "What diabolical timing!" On the very day of the 7th Republican debate among a dwindling field of some of the most extreme presidential candidates in history, Scalia's death sparked immediate tensions over the future composition of the Supreme Court. And since the appointment of a more liberal Justice at the time would have tipped the scales toward progressive rulings, and away from conservative positions on both corporate prerogatives and hot button social issues, this unexpected development had monumental ramifications.

It would be supremely cynical to suppose that the Devil had a hand in Justice Scalia's sudden death. During that session of the Supreme Court, a historically consequential docket of cases was pending, so it was a juncture in history that was extraordinary. Antonin Scalia died just after another of many narrowly ideological and anti-progressive 5-4 rulings against the common good, which included a provisional decision against President Obama's Clean Air legislation that sent shockwaves across the world, coming as it did after the historic Paris Climate Accords. "May we live in interesting times!" This development made me marvel about whether this reputed old Chinese saying is a curse or a blessing, because Scalia's death suddenly cast much more significance on the ideological composition of the Court during a highly contentious primary election season. Since the long-term impact of the composition of the highest court in the land will have even more significance than who wins a presidential election, the heightened attention to the Supreme Court provided a sensational shaft of light on the implications of who was to choose future Supreme Court Justices.

Nine months later, Trump grabbed power, helped by Mitch McConnell's refusal to let President Obama appoint a replacement for Scalia. And the two managed to stack federal courts with more than 230 "conservative" judges. It is now time to reject on-going Republican bids for their ability to abuse power. They pose too big a threat to democratic governance, and are intent on denying fairer representation to the people. Their goals are wrong to give more and more power to corporate entities, and to exacerbate growing inequalities.

The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling and later *McCutcheon* decision are facilitating wrongful abuses of money for power, and in turn, this is making it easier to abuse power to get money. This downward spiral of perverted principles and betrayed trust give the American people good reason to feel deeply cynical about their political representatives. Master manipulators are stoking people's grievances and causing their anger to be misdirected towards liberals and government, with the upshot that the figurative bad guys are winning, and are working feverishly to deceive the people by pretending to be the ones who are wearing the white hats.

These slick and wily politicians really want to gain increasingly domineering power in order to enable them to push through many of their anti-populist top priorities. Here is what they are trying do:

- (1) Give more of the nation's wealth to high-income earners and wealthy people.
- (2) Cut spending on environmental protections and family planning programs and affordable insurance for

healthcare for millions of people, including financing for Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and food stamps.

(3) Reduce regulations on businesses, especially on big banks and on giant corporations that sell fossil fuels and prescription drugs and guns.

(4) Give "personhood rights" to sprawling octopus-like corporate entities, even though this can result in trends that are highly contrary to the common good due to the fact that corporations are amoral and anti-democratic by design. They do, after all, have just two main legal purposes: to limit liability of owners and to maximize profits for shareholders.

(5) Increase spending on the military, and be more aggressive in "coercive diplomacy", and intervening in the domestic affairs of people in other nations around the world.

(6) Eliminate the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy for any woman, no matter what man got her pregnant or how his seed got into her fallopian tube. They do this in favor of giving the rights of personhood to a clump of cells from the moment of conception, while opposing the rights and prerogatives and provisions for the well-being of women and children.

Listen, my fellow Americans, these "conservatives" are "sugar-coating manure and pretending they are creating a doughnut." Let's not be so gullible as to believe this unsavory sleight of hand. Throw these shrewd operators out of office so that we can have new leaders who commit to enacting fairer, more reasonable plans.

Serious consideration should be given to the extent that a deep current of racism still affects our American society. This racist attitude was manifested in the blatant hostility by Republicans to President Obama. The country western singer Merle Haggard made this provocative observation in 2010: "It's really almost criminal what they do with our President. There seems to be no shame or anything. They call him all kinds of names all day long, saying he's doing certain things that he's not. It's just a big old political game that I don't want to be part of. There are people spending their lives putting him down."

Colin Powell spoke out on this issue in 2013 during an appearance on Meet The Press, when he condemned a GOP "dark vein of intolerance" and the party's repeated use of racial code words to oppose President Obama and to rally white conservative voters. Without mentioning names, Colin Powell (who died in October 2021) singled out former Mitt Romney surrogate and New Hampshire Governor John Sununu for calling Obama "lazy", and Sarah Palin, who used slavery-era terms to describe Obama. Powell stated: "There's also a dark vein of intolerance in some parts of the party. What do I mean by that? I mean by that they still sort of look down on minorities. How can I evidence that? When I see a former governor say that the President is "shuckin' and jivin'," that's racial era slave term. When I see another former governor after the president's first debate where he didn't do very well, says that the president was lazy. He didn't say he was slow, or tired, or didn't do well. He said he was lazy. Now, it may not mean anything to most Americans, but to those of us who are African Americans, the second word is shiftless and then there's a third word that goes along with that. The birther, the whole birther movement. Why do senior Republican leaders tolerate this kind of discussion within the party?"

Consider the Far-Reaching Influence of the Supreme Court

There is another crucial issue that makes it propitious for American voters to have rejected the bid by conservatives for the presidency in 2012, and it is a provocative reason why they should have done so again in 2016. Since federal court judges and Supreme Court Justices are appointed for life, the ability for advocates of far right dogmas to be able to stack the courts with more ideological conservatives would let them give more unaccountable power to corporations and rich persons for generations to come. This would further undermine representation that is truly fair to all the American people. Courts that are more conservative provide excessive energy to pet causes of right-wing politicians, like reducing protections of public lands and the environment and endangered species. Such strengthening of market fundamentalist agendas incidentally has served to energize efforts to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* women's rights, and onerously erodes the civil liberties of millions of Americans. For further perspective, see my essay *Women's Rights: Let Freedom Ring - Honestly!*

In times of increased insecurity and social crisis, it is easier for strong authoritarian types to seize the bigger opportunities to gain power. Freedom lovers, take note of this! Increasing inequities make everyone less secure, and by letting our leaders mainly represent the interests of the richest Americans, we make crises more likely. It

will be a tragic day for the world if voters let conservatives gain more power in the November 2022 elections. It is sensational that our nation, founded in reaction to the tyranny of the British Empire in the 18th century, is so close to being bamboozled into electing more of the people who are sedulously selling similar swindles. Election deniers and seditious Trump Republicans pose an existential threat of bringing our great American experiment in democratic government to an ignominious end.

Let us now demand that our leaders begin to chart a much more responsible course to a fairer future. Let's also demand that all our representatives join together to formulate wiser, more moderate and more long-term-oriented policies that are consistent with the greater good. We must Build Back Better!

Freedom and Equality

Mark Twain famously declared that we have the best government that money can buy. When we allow our representatives to be sold to the highest bidder, we would be crazy to expect any other outcome than that rich people and highly profitable corporations would corrupt our national decision-making.

"The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few is the death knell of democracy."

--- *We're Not in Lake Wobegon Anymore*, Garrison Keillor

The increasing concentration of wealth and power that has been taking place in the USA since 1980 is unfair to the majority of people, so it is contrary to the founding principles of our democracy.

Money is power due to its large influence in our elections and in Congress. Big Money represents excessive power because of its defining impact on the laws enacted and benefits provided in our country. Large numbers of lobbyists work continuously to influence legislation, and their influence is unwarranted when they manipulate people's perceptions by means of slick marketing, deceitful political advertising, misleading spin and sneaky provisions inserted into legislation.

Former Louisiana Senator John Breaux declared in 1981, after getting huge sugar subsidies inserted into tax-cut legislation: "My vote can't be bought, but it can be rented." In our revolving-door system, many politicians retire from politics to become well-paid lobbyists after their terms in office. This is another sad aspect of distorting and corrupting influences in our political system.

When the Supreme Court ruled in the *Citizens United* case that rich people and big corporations and labor unions could spend unlimited amounts of money on elections, Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens strongly expressed his dissent from the narrow decision. He declared it to be "a rejection of the common sense of the American people, who have recognized a need to prevent corporations from undermining self-government since the founding, and who have fought against the distinctive corrupting potential of corporate electioneering since the days of Theodore Roosevelt." So true!

The great progressive Senator Paul Wellstone would be turning over in his grave if he could see that the efforts he made to institute sensible campaign finance reforms were posthumously overturned by the Supreme Court in the *Citizens United* ruling. And many Americans are beginning to dislike our democracy because of the obvious extent that it means being exposed to a negative hyper-barrage of manipulative attack ads and urgent fundraising appeals and often dishonest political messages. Let's demand that Big Money be ejected from the driver's seat of our election campaigns! People are beginning to have an intense distaste for the divisiveness of our two monopolistic political parties, so fairer compromises are needed now. People of the world, unite!

The trend for our economic and political systems to be corrupted by the influence of Big Money has gotten significantly worse since the Supreme Court rejected long-standing precedents in *Citizens United*. It is an affront to fair-minded principles of a democratic republic to allow unlimited amounts of money to be spent by wealthy people and profit-prepossessed corporations to buy our representatives and influence our elections and profoundly corrupt our policy-making.

When the *Citizens United* decision gave special interest groups much more power, it effectively diminished the voices of the people. The ruling was made only because corporate apologists who approve of this unfair trend narrowly dominated the Supreme Court. The resulting tsunami of money has had distinctly detrimental effects on

our elections and on fairness in Congressional decision-making. This fact proves that the ruling has been one of the worst decisions ever made by the Supreme Court.

The Costs of Increasing Inequality

Since the bottom-line result of Republican policies that gained force beginning with the presidency of Ronald Reagan has been to increase the wealth concentration in the hands of the few, the desperation of the bottom 50% of the American people has increased. This outcome has resulted from three primary "conservative" initiatives: (1) the implementation of highly regressive changes in taxation like Ronald Reagan's radical reduction in tax rates on the highest levels of incomes; (2) the undermining of collective bargaining power of American workers while corporate entities have been given more power, more tax loopholes, and more ways to privatize profits by socializing costs; and (3) the actions that have driven up the federal debt from under \$1 trillion in 1981 to \$31 trillion today to finance stimulative economic policies and ramped up military spending, all the while allowing rich people to pay the lowest tax rates in generations at the direct expense of everyone else, tragically including all people in the future.

Almost all the financial benefits of productivity increases in the past few decades have been usurped by the top ten percent of Americans by means of these three gambits. This is a "rent-seeking" outcome that is a form of redistribution of the nation's wealth from working people to wealthy investors. The fact that these investors are allowed to pay very low capital gains taxes on the income they get from these activities is blatantly unfair to workers who must pay higher tax rates on the income they receive for their work. This outcome in the struggle between capitalists and workers was one of the main goals of Ronald Reagan's policies, just as it was for the policies of George W. Bush. And, this was a principal goal of the sketchy economic proposals that Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan made during their failed 2012 presidential campaign. And in 2016, all Republican politicians sided with perpetuating this regressive aspect of the status quo. And once Trump was elected, despite getting almost 3 million votes fewer than Hillary Clinton, scheming Republicans managed to pass a Tax Cut Act in December 2017, by a vote of 51-50 in the Senate, that gave the Trump family alone many millions of dollars in benefits.

This state of affairs is not only outrageously contrary to the broad-minded founding principles of our democratic republic, but it is also economically foolish. Because consumer spending accounts for about 70% of economic activity in the U.S., when the financial well-being of the majority of people is undermined, the economy ends up in the doldrums. This contributes to stagnant demand, and serves to increase the number of people who do not have jobs, and to create an undesirable feedback loop that makes this situation inexorably worse.

Joseph Stiglitz makes a convincing case in *The Price of Inequality* that, when rich people seize a larger share of the economic pie for themselves, their actions make the size of the pie smaller than it otherwise would be. This is due to the suppressive effect on economic growth of wealth being highly concentrated. The pie is smaller than it would be with a fairer wealth distribution -- despite deceitful conservative contentions to the contrary.

The goal of giving rich people more money is being achieved by taking unfair advantage of the main institutional mechanisms that facilitate the concentration of wealth: allowing corporations to usurp domineering power and abuse it for self-interested purposes, and letting deceptive ideological assertions and scaremongering tactics sway many voters and election contests. Our Founders would be shocked, awed and dismayed!

A Preview of Things to Come

There are first-rate reasons why a different national "redistribution" of income is not only a good idea, but an overarching necessity. The current distribution has been shrewdly rigged to give an excessive proportion of the benefits of economic activities to the top 1% of Americans, so this system has become injudiciously skewed to misguided objectives.

Public policies change the distribution of income, as they have done since Ronald Reagan began reversing progressive tax policies by slashing marginal tax rates on the highest income earners by a whopping 60% in the 1980s. Less obvious, but possibly even more influential, are government policies that have enormous effects on the distribution of income *before taxes or government benefits are taken into account*. Public policies establish "the rules of the game", so they have determinative effects by putting laws into effect that affect trade, copyrights,

contracts, corporate governance, securities, capital, labor rules, minimum wages, overtime pay and government regulations related to banks, financial markets and entrepreneurial ventures. A wide variety of exceptionally special deals are also given to vested interest groups, and the Federal Reserve pursues policies that lopsidedly aid and abet the appreciation in rich people's assets.

Systemic corruption has allowed an antisocial domination of our society by those who champion a crazy form of capitalistic "socialism of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich." This system gives unwarranted perks to rich people, crony capitalists and big corporations, CEOs and their lobbyists. It is a self-reinforcing and politically enabled monster that really should be more reasonably regulated. Being a gal who is inspired by legitimate and peaceable methods, and being highly respectful of Solon-wise governance, I call for non-violent revolutionary reforms as soon as possible that consequentially change our economic and political systems.

Since there are so many ways these systems are rigged, the most expedient way to immediately accomplish this change is by leaving all provisions of the current established system as they are and implementing more steeply graduated taxes on income, capital gains and inheritances. These changes should be made effective ASAP. This revision in the tax code should be designed to reduce budget deficits and simultaneously provide increased funding for investments in healthcare for all, public education, needed national infrastructure, convenient public transportation, conservation programs and protections of the environment.

Then, having used this broad-stroke expediency to set straighter our national finances, we should begin to fix our economic and political systems. One good reason we need to make our tax system more progressive is so that everyone will be able to afford the first fix that should be enacted: an immediate increase in federal gasoline taxes by \$1 per gallon, with these funds being used to fairly offset the higher costs to those who can't afford it. At the same time we should begin dealing aggressively with our shifting utilitarian necessities, like making investments in cleaner renewable energy, reducing the profligate and polluting waste of fossil fuels, and cutting down on the amount of greenhouse gas emissions being spewed into the atmosphere. These steps should be taken to make our societies fairer and more sustainable. The justifications and parameters of the wide-ranging reforms required are spelled out in this Common Sense Revival, and specifically in *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*.

A Shockingly Fair-Minded Plan

If we really want to make our system fairer, we would formulate a restitution plan for the fiscal swindles that have resulted in the increase of the national debt by more than \$33 trillion since 1980. One way to do this would be to require wealthy people to give up some of the enormous gains they have received in the past 40 years by assessing a one-time wealth tax that would reduce the national debt by \$5 trillion from the current level. Presto! -- the risk of a debt crisis would suddenly be reduced.

Just think about it. Such an action would increase the overall average well-being and security of the American people, and the costs and risks of increasing inequities would be attenuated, and truer prosperity could reign.

Imagine my surprise, considering the radical nature of this proposal, as detailed below, when I stumbled across an eminently convincing analysis by the Boston Consulting Group that actually recommended the assessment of a One-Time Wealth Tax on rich people in order to get our financial state in sound order. The Boston group's report was titled *Back to Mesopotamia?: Looming Threat of Debt Restructuring*. The authors astutely contend that the price could be very high for nations worldwide to continue kicking the can down the road by failing to address the root causes of a looming potential national debt crisis. A continuing failure to act would significantly increase risks that "an unconstrained financial and economic crisis" will afflict the U.S. and global economy. This would be a disastrous outcome, and could make the recession of 2008-2009 look like a picnic in the park. The authors painstakingly calculate that a one-time wealth tax of an average 25% of the financial assets of the wealthiest Americans would resolve this dangerous dilemma.

A few years after I first considered this proposal, the respected French economist Thomas Piketty wrote a relative blockbuster titled *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, and in this monumental 700-page book he also indicated that a global wealth tax would be a good plan for civilized societies.

Here is the background idea to support this proposal. Toward the end of 2011, our nation's attention was focused on efforts by a so-called Super Committee to come up with a plan to cut \$1.5 trillion from an anticipated \$10 trillion in additional deficits projected to be incurred in the decade to follow. The super-partisan Super Committee was unable to agree to any debt deal, so an automatic "fiscal cliff" of budget cuts was created that went into effect in January 2013. The 15% reduction they were seeking was actually a completely inadequate amount. At the time, President Obama had proposed a "grand compromise" of a \$4 trillion reduction, but even that amount was not really enough. After all, such a reduction would still have left us indulging in the shortsighted expediency of borrowing another \$6 trillion from every taxpayer in every future year to finance low tax rates for rich people and high levels of spending.

Almost all Americans have been complicit in wanting lower taxes, while our aggregate demands have driven increases in federal government spending. But Americans want these things without having to pay for them. The only beneficiaries that have big bucks to show for the foolishly expedient courses of action we have been pursuing since 1980 are the top 20% of Americans who own more than 90% of the total net worth in America.

Most of this total net worth in the U.S. is highly concentrated at the top. The richest 1% of people own over 40% of all non-home wealth. This includes stocks, bonds, business equity, trust funds, savings accounts, non-home real estate, and the cash value of life insurance and pension plans. This concentration of wealth has been facilitated by rash reductions in taxes on top income earners, the outcome initiated by Ronald Reagan when he so drastically slashed tax rates on the top levels of income.

Let's go figure. The total net worth of all Americans in the U.S. is probably about \$115 trillion in October 2022. Of this, home equity is a record nearly \$29 trillion. So there is a net \$86 trillion in financial wealth in the U.S., and the richest 1% of Americans who own more than 40% of this wealth thus have over \$34 trillion in assets.

This represents an asset increase for the top 1% up from \$3 trillion they had in 1980. Santa Claus tax-cutting scams have resulted in borrowings by the federal government of more than \$30 trillion during this period. A direct correlation exists here: we have in effect given the richest 1% of Americans over \$30 trillion by borrowing it from every taxpayer in the future. The interest expense obligations on borrowed money will total an additional \$20 trillion every 15 to 20 years or so, depending on prevailing interest rates, so we will be forced to pay this huge cost over and over and over again, or add it to the accumulating national debt.

This borrowing-to-enrich-the-rich scheme is not highway robbery, grand larceny or an armed bank hold-up. It could sensibly be regarded as the biggest financial swindle in world history, and it is a crime being committed against our children and all people in future years. There has, of course, been wider participation in this wealth embezzlement scheme than just the top 1% of Americans who have been ring leaders and primary beneficiaries. The top 20% of Americans who own more than 90% of the total financial net worth also have been beneficiaries.

Our nation is desperately seeking a solution to *Seven Primary Challenges We Must Honestly Deal With*, which are spelled out in *Happy Harbingers in Good Ideas for a Better Future* (on page 186 of this *Common Sense Revival*). Our failure to solve these problems endangers our national security and well-being. The richest 1% of Americans unquestionably hold the key to these solutions, so we should look to them for restitution for the monumental scam that they have been perpetrating. We must demand that they Stand and Deliver!

The principal of restitution is an integral part of virtually every formal system of criminal justice. Perpetrators of financial crimes are required to make payment to the victims of their malfeasance. The civil justice system also has provisions for civil recovery of losses and damages. This civil justice system does not attempt to determine the guilt or innocence of offenders, or to incarcerate them. Civil courts assess the amount of liabilities that scam perpetrators have, including both offenders and third-party participants. They do this to objectively determine the harms sustained as a result of particular criminal activities.

Here is a restitution proposal that would have a collateral benefit of reducing the likelihood of a national debt crisis. Here's the plan. Let's call it a Fair Play Wealth Assessment. Immediately assess \$5 trillion to the richest people in the U.S. This \$5 trillion will only be a part of the more than \$40 trillion possessed by the wealthiest

people in the country. Make this wealth assessment progressive, assessing it to the following four groups of advantaged people, and fairly graduating it, as follows:

| | |
|---|------------------------|
| (1) Americans whose net worth is between \$1 million and \$5 million | \$ 1.0 trillion |
| (2) Americans whose net worth is between \$5 million and \$20 million | 1.0 trillion |
| (3) Americans whose net worth is between \$20 million and \$100 million | 1.5 trillion |
| (4) Americans whose net worth is more than \$100 million | <u>1.5</u> trillion |
| Total One-Time Assessment | \$ <u>5.0</u> trillion |

This Fair Play Wealth Assessment should be due upon death. Those who are assessed can choose to pay this principal balance at any time, with 5% interest payable annually on any amounts that are unpaid. To most fairly apportion this assessment to each person within these categories, assess whatever percent is needed to achieve the group's targeted revenue contributions. The calculations or categories should be adjusted as appropriate to ensure that it is fairest for all, and to ensure that no individual's net worth is reduced by more than:

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| Category (1): | 5% |
| Category (2): | 15% |
| Category (3): | 40% |
| Category (4): | 60% |

Presto! At the stroke of a pen, we would reduce the national debt by \$5 trillion. That would significantly mitigate the debt problem here in the United States, and it would make our economic system more stable and our citizens more secure. Europeans should follow suit to solve their own serious debt problems by a similar initiative, because their debts have also been engendered in part by similar swindles by wealthy people who have abused the influence of their money.

We could decide to distribute 10% of the \$5 trillion in proceeds, or a total of \$500 billion, to all the estimated 150 million Americans who are so financially insecure that they have an average net worth of less than \$15,000. This plan would diminish the extreme insecurity of half the people in our nation and stimulate the economy by giving these people money to spend for things they need.

This plan would also have the big advantage that it would help poor people afford the higher costs of needed mandates to internalize costs that are currently being externalized. These mandates should be put into effect to provide powerful incentives for resource conservation, and to promote the efficiency of resource usages and a sustained move toward renewable alternatives.

At the same time, we should honestly tackle the forces that drive annual budget deficits. Our goal should be to formulate a plan that is fair to taxpayers in the future by keeping the national debt from ever again exceeding 100% of GDP. The only other time in U.S. history, other than the past 5 years, that our national debt exceeded 100% of GDP was shortly after World War II, when debt had been incurred to combat the world-conquering militaristic ambitions of despotic leaders in Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy and Emperor Hirohito's Japan. Today, we have incurred this dangerously high level of debt for a much less necessary purpose -- to give corporations and high-income earners the freedom to shirk the responsibility that comes from being the primary beneficiaries of the way our economic and political systems are structured.

A natural conclusion would be that we should re-structure our economic and political systems to prevent abuses of power by those who take advantage of the system at the expense of the general public and people in the future. Having mitigated concerns over this global debt crisis by means of this restitution plan, we should then proceed to make our world safer, more mutually secure, greener, and more committed to sustainable ways of living. This leads directly to proposals in *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*.

Observations about Political Compromise

Our political system has always involved give-and-take compromises between various interest groups competing for perks, privileges and power. Since conservatives have become much more uncompromising over the past 20 years, many Republicans have taken a "purity pledge" to anti-tax iconoclast Grover Norquist, whose overriding conviction is that the government should be shrunk down "to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub." These people

regard the elimination of tens or hundreds of thousands of jobs in the public sector as a goal more important than the common good.

This orthodox purity is a stubborn refusal to compromise, and a crude, fantastically simplistic form of dogmatic ideology that requires adherents to suspend disbelief and throw in with the narrowly self-serving goals of the rich. This plan is cynically contrary to the general welfare of the citizenry. It is sad that such efforts have been accompanied by a tendency for the Republican Party to become more socially reactionary in recent years.

During the pandemic in 2020, Mitch McConnell, for his own usual diabolically self-interested reasons, wanted to let state and local governments go bankrupt, instead of bailing them out like the federal government did in March 2020 when it began shoveling \$3 trillion in relief to Big Businesses, Small Businesses, tax breaks to the rich, and stimulus payments and unemployment benefits to individuals. In borrowing so lavishly, plans to preserve employment relationships were foolishly neglected, with 40 million persons having initially lost jobs.

Republicans support plans that seem to be designed to foist a reactionary form of social engineering on the American people, and to deprive women of family planning options and rights to make personal decisions relating to their healthcare, reproductive choices and childbearing. It's astonishing that many GOP politicians who run for office have a chance of winning despite advocating misogynistic policies like the official plank in the Republican platform that opposes all abortions, with no exceptions for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest or that put the life of a pregnant woman at risk. In 2012, Paul Ryan supported this plank, as did "legitimate rape" Missourian Todd Akin and Indiana's Richard Mourdock, who stated that when a woman becomes pregnant from a rape, "it is something that God intended." Mourdock went on to say that the government should prohibit a woman from getting an abortion even if a rapist got her pregnant. That attitude is obscene!

In many countries, religious freedom is severely limited by patriarchal cultures, and males are assumed to have a God-given right to restrict women's freedoms and rights. An important aspect of the freedom of religion that is guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights is the freedom from religion -- i.e., the freedom from unreasonable dictates of religious authorities. The attitudes of Republicans in state legislatures, like those passing rigid abortion bans, are brutally antagonistic to the health and well-being of women, and their personal rights and contraceptive options and abortion. These generally white male politicians seem to vow, Taliban-like, to have the government impose restrictions on women's prerogatives, and to limit their rights and deprive them of the liberty to make personal reproductive decisions in their lives. All Americans should oppose such tyranny!

Everyone should be guaranteed the freedom to believe whatever religious stories they fancy, even ones that have been interpreted to mean that Earth is a mere 6,000 years old, despite scientific certainty that our home planet has been orbiting the Sun for billions of years. When people cling to beliefs that contradict scientific understandings in ways that are consequentially harmful, however, these beliefs cannot be allowed to have determining sway in our policy-making. As a compelling instance, the belief that human actions are acceptable when they result in billions of tons of greenhouse gases being spewed into the atmosphere every year is to have blind faith in a harm-causing lack of accurate comprehension. Since such a belief has enormous costs, it cannot be allowed to prevent us from instituting measures that would mitigate associated risks.

It is noteworthy that two primary camps existed among our Founders: those who advocated Jeffersonian ideals and those who advocated Hamiltonian ideals. Jeffersonians believed in equality of opportunity and democratic fairness, and they gave priority to plain folk. They believed that effective rules should be established in order to protect people from abuses of power by aristocratic elites and those who demand outsized special privileges. Hamiltonians, in contrast, were federalist nationalists who emphasized the importance of having a strong Constitution and a federal government with expansive centralized powers, particularly in arenas of funding the state, building infrastructure, paying for national defense, and establishing trade relations with other countries.

Debates were acrimonious back then, but the Founders managed to compromise together to form a more perfect Union. Today's Republicans? "Damn the Union!" they seem to be saying. "Preserve low tax rates for the rich! And tough luck to women, gay people, immigrants and our descendants!" And in 2022, "Damn democracy." Perhaps we need a good therapist to reconcile these dysfunctional relationships!

An Appeal for Courageous Fair-Minded Voices

At a time that we obviously need more inclusively fair decision making, it is instructive to see instances in history when leaders subverted the greater good. One egregious example of this was revealed when a member of the inner ranks of George W. Bush's administration was fired. This purge of a reasonable voice took place in December 2002 with the firing of Lawrence B. Lindsey, the director of the National Economic Council at the time and an advisor to the president on economic policy. Think about the circumstances. Lindsey had publicly provided a projection of the cost of a contemplated preemptive war on Iraq to be in the range of \$200 billion. This contradicted both the shrewd war profiteer Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who were trying to sell estimates that the war would cost less than \$50 billion.

As it turned out, these leaders were involved in a bizarrely brazen, deeply duplicitous and insensibly zealous crusade to promote a preemptive war of international aggression to the American people, and they actuated this ruse by low-balling the cost, and by claiming it would be a "cakewalk war". Lindsey was fired for not parroting the party line, but history reveals that the war and long-term military occupation has in fact cost trillions of dollars. And it has had far-reaching collateral consequences by destabilizing the region and contributing to a wider and apparently endless Orwellian war on terror and the provoked growth of terrorist groups. This destabilizing geopolitical strategy is turning out very badly for hundreds of millions of people around the world.

In addition to the firing of Lindsey, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill was also fired over his cautions concerning tax cuts during a time of costly wars in the Middle East. These firings damningly reveal a deep ethical rot that undermines our country's purposes. Since these terminations involved slick efforts to sell an extremely costly and unnecessary war, they were abuses of power that ratcheted up the rate at which elite factions of this nation mortgaged the American people under the forgiving eyes of a false god, for the absurd goal of making rich people richer beyond any possible measure of fairness, rational planning, national security, overall happiness and prospects of sustainability. These two terminations violated overarching principles of our Founding Fathers to establish an enduring nation that would be free from despotic abuses of power and would emphasize the general welfare and create a democratic republic in which the people would be fairly represented.

Remember John Steinbeck's observations about "a Congress of honest men" during the early stages of World War II. These men had refused an appropriation of several hundreds of millions of dollars to feed the people because they believed the economic structure of the country would collapse under the pressure of such expenditure. Think about what Steinbeck was saying when he noted, "the same men, just as honestly, are devoting many billions to the manufacture, transportation and detonation of explosives to protect the people they would not feed." And recognize that the great author was referring to honest men. DISHONEST men, on the other hand, are obviously capable of wreaking an even worse toll on the world by being excessively staunch in their dedication to coldly-calculated self-interest and ideology over reason.

In the Senate, Republican Mitch McConnell was so audaciously corrupt that he proudly displayed venomous editorial cartoons on the walls of his Senate office in D.C. that lampoon him for his staunch opposition to campaign finance reform. He did this in spite of the fact that such reforms would give the American people more voice and sensibly limit the amount of influence that wealthy people and big corporations have in dictating our national policies on crucial issues like international trade, jobs, tax rates and the environment.

While most politicians desperately want to be liked, McConnell has relished his reputation as a villain. "After all," as Politico Magazine states, "he achieved his iron-fisted grip on the politics of his home state and his fractious party on Capitol Hill through discipline, cunning and, oftentimes, fear." Tellingly, McConnell was first elected to the Senate in 1984 with the help of a wily political ad produced by archconservative Roger Ailes. The ad scurrilously showed a pack of bloodhounds running around searching for his opponent. That image was once again evocative in 2016 as the internecine Republican contest for the nomination of their party for the presidency gave way to tremendous uncertainty in a calamitous Trumpian triumph. And McConnell has taken to proudly proclaiming himself "the grim reaper" of progressive legislation and honest bipartisan reforms.

For most of Barack Obama's presidency, McConnell was the face of Republican obstructionism. He is a central part of a larger political upheaval as an increasingly ugly civil war has embroiled the Republican Party, pitting its

conservative establishment against its more extreme conservative Tea Party and Freedom Caucus insurgency and anti-establishment fervor and twisted demagogic despotic Trumpism. For all too long, right-wing factions have been winning. In prior years, they ousted Republican senators that Mitch McConnell called friends and peers, veterans like Indiana's Richard Lugar and Utah's Bob Bennett -- "rock-ribbed conservatives both", who were not afraid of working with Democrats. Lugar lost a re-election bid in a 2012 primary election in Indiana to whacko Tea Party extremist Richard Mourdock, and this outcome brought the disciplined McConnell to the brink of tears on the Senate floor. "You're a treasure to the Senate and a model of the public servant," an emotional McConnell declared. "We're sorry to see you go, and I'm sorry to lose your wise counsel."

Moderation, not extremism and not hard times swindles, would be much better for the people. "Ditch Mitch!"

Says Scott Rasmussen, "GOP candidates would be well advised to shift their focus from attacking the poor to going after those who are really dependent upon government -- the Political Class, the crony capitalists, the megabanks and other recipients of corporate welfare."

A Sign from God?

The colossal storm Sandy that struck the East Coast at the end of October 2012 turned out to be one of the most costly natural disasters in history. The epic hurricanes in 2017, and then Hurricane Ian that devastated parts of Florida in September 2022, were likewise very costly. The federal government rushed to help people whose lives were disrupted by these tragedies, and this role of the government in assisting people who are victims of natural disasters can be seen to be vitally important. Such calamities highlighted the radical nature of conservatives' anti-government convictions. In a presidential primary debate late in 2011, Mitt Romney had said that disaster assistance should be sent back to the states, "and if you can go even further, and send it back to the private sector, that's even better." Really? Such a mindset would be verily preposterous!

It is astonishing that some people hold ideological convictions that blind them so severely that they suppose amoral profit-obsessed private corporations would do a better job than the federal government in helping millions of people who suffered adversities due to colossally violent storms -- or pandemic contagions. Corporations, realistically, would be much more likely to *find cunning ways to cut costs!*

People tend to come together during times of natural disasters, and the first responders who work long hours to help other people and save many lives deserve heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

Poorly considered anti-government ideologies are a threat to the well-being of millions of Americans. If we extrapolate, we see that such doctrines are a threat to the future security of everyone in our nation. The American people would have been served much better if we had created a "rainy day fund" to pay for costs of natural disasters, instead of having made our country more fiscally unstable by indulging in the expediency of running huge budget deficits every year to finance high levels of spending on the military, along with inadequate levels of revenues collected due to historically low tax rates given to persons with the highest incomes.

It is almost as if these powerful storms were signs from God. Superstorm Sandy, after all, suspiciously came just one week before the national elections on November 6, 2012. It is less likely that these were signs from God, rather than actually being signs from Mother Earth telling humanity that we should listen to scientists who tell us there is a global warming effect associated with spewing billions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere every year. Maybe God was telling us to reject denials by "conservative" politicians about these big risks. Greenhouse gases are causing an unsteady but inexorable increase in average global temperatures, and this warming is causing ominous ecosystem impacts and changes in weather patterns around the planet. The costs of these changes are escalating as hurricanes, tornadoes and other storms become more severe, and as trends develop like worsening heat waves, floods, droughts, crop failures, wildfires and insidiously increasingly coastal flooding caused by rising sea levels and storm surges. Hear these words anew as the melting West Antarctic Ice Sheet continues to disintegrate into the sea.

Apologists for the status quo generally want businesses and individuals to be able to continue their polluting and carbon-emitting activities without being required to pay for remedial measures. They apparently believe it's a good plan to stick taxpayers with the cost of efforts to mitigate the damages that result. We should take a courageous

stand against this scheme of allowing costs to be socialized to maximize private profits. The costs of damages caused by extreme weather events should be covered by funds generated from fees on carbon emissions rather than by allowing these costs to be externalized. We are already imposing a long litany of costs and ecological harms and detrimental effects of resource depletion onto people in future generations, so it is outrageous to allow short-term-oriented expediencies to harshly compound these unfolding adversities.

Foreboding changes in weather and precipitation patterns around the world tell us we should begin to heed sensible precautionary principles. A good enunciation of these ideas can be found in *Intelligent Precautionary Principles Enunciated -- Holy Cow!* Our societies would be much healthier, wholesome and holistic if we were to choose to recognize, respect and honor the feminine facets of God, and of our psyches, and of females in our cultures. These aspects of our humanity have been repressed for many millennia by authorities in the world's patriarchal religions, with their judgmental dominant dogmas that perpetuate discrimination, and their rigid interpretations of Scriptures and retrogressive, antediluvian, anti-scientific and markedly sexist worldviews.

Concluding Observations, More or Less

"The flowering of genius in ancient Greece was due to the immense impetus given when clarity and power of thought was added to great spiritual force."

--- *The Greek Way*, Edith Hamilton

Addressing concerns of individuals and of communities are both vitally important. Fair compromises should be made to assure a wholesome balance between these two often-conflicting sets of concerns. Fair-mindedness contributes to the greater good, the general welfare, and an ethical search for common ground. As Edith Hamilton wrote: "The bitterest conflicts that have divided the minds of men and set family against family, and brother against brother, have been waged for one side of the truth to the suppression of the other side."

Turmoil and dissension envelop our modern world because we cannot figuratively see the forest for the trees, and are thus literally unable to find an equitable balance between the claims of wealthy individuals and claims of the majority. In particular, there is a grave imbalance between the demands of rich people to pay low tax rates and the wide-ranging needs of society to make farsighted investments in education, infrastructure, clean energy, affordable social safety net programs, and environmental protections. Low tax rates for the highest-income earners also make it all but impossible to balance federal budgets. We must find ways to stop financing operations and low taxes through the unfair expediency of borrowing from folks in the future.

Dante Alighieri was cynical about his native Firenze on account of the harsh way it had treated him, so he wrote that Florence was "the embodiment of a society that had lost its way, a society that had sacrificed the good of the community to the interests of powerful individuals: in short, a society which, by obsessively seeking heaven on earth, had made a hell of life on earth." An alarm sounds!

With more modern understandings, we can do better than Florence did 700 years ago when Dante was alive. The social cohesion of more harmonious societal relationships is a positive force, as Joseph Stiglitz makes clear in *The Price of Inequality*. It must necessarily involve striking a better balance between guarantees of personal liberties, a bigger modicum of security for all, and fairer rules of law. A new ethical and spiritual perspective is needed that will provide us with a saner balance in our selfishly shortsighted and materialistic world. And this perspective calls for a Golden Rule commitment to the well-being of others -- and of our descendants.

True justice and injustice are being blurred today in the complex interplay between competing interests. One consequence is that wholly inadequate value has been given to the balance and health of Earth's natural ecosystems. It is astonishingly foolhardy for us to collectively continue encouraging increases in human numbers (especially in developing countries) while stimulating activities that diminish the carrying capacity of Earth's ecosystems to provide for all of humanity. Better ideas on how to remedy these problems are investigated throughout this manifesto. Let's take a stand together to commit our nation to greater fairness to our heirs!

The Dalai Lama made a provocative statement at a Vancouver Peace Summit in 2009: "The world will be saved by the Western woman." Maybe so! Freedom of expression is a powerful thing, and surely there have been many occasions in history when the pen has proved to be mightier than the sword. Eh, Voltaire?

For better illumination, I recommend *A Feminine Vision of an Achievable Better World: Anima Should Reign!* This essay contains valuable understandings about the many ways that sensible feminism and broad-minded empowerment of women and a more honorable valuing of feminine sensibilities of every person could advance greater good causes. And for the hyper political, check out the powerful ideas expressed in *See Clearly: Sanity during Insane Times - Book Twelve of the Earth Manifesto*.

The time has come today for us to collectively stand up, step forward, and revolutionarily make our human societies fairer, healthier, safer, more just, and more sustainable. "Let's roll!"

Truly,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain Begun in 2015, updated 2017, 2019, 2020, Dec. 2021, Oct. 2022 and May 2024

P.S. See the Appendix at the end of the online version of *Uncommon Sense and Fair-Mindedness* for additional somewhat dated but valid observations that are not included in Book One due to space considerations. This is optional reading!

Appendix to Uncommon Sense and Fairmindedness

The remainder of this essay contains somewhat dated but valid observations that are not included in *Uncommon Sense and Fair-Mindedness* in Book One, due to space considerations.

Merchants of Doubt

Note that with respect to Mark Twain's reckoning that against the assault of laughter, "nothing can stand", those words were written long before the rewards for preposterous oppositional stands on issues like climate action became so lucrative, and well before the price of souls sold went down in direct proportion to the degree that campaign war chests were filled by lavish contributions from fossil fuel companies, billionaires who want to profit from polluting and public health harming activities, timber industry barons and huge multinational corporations like those involved in the military-industrial complex.

President Obama repeatedly called on Congress to pass legislation to reduce carbon emissions, and then the climate change denier James Inhofe made an unholy ascension in January 2015 to chairman of the Senate committee that oversaw the environment, obstructing proper regulation. Then Trump grabbed power and appointed the oil industry lobbyist and lawyer Scott Pruitt to the EPA, and after he resigned due to a number of scandals, Trump appointed the coal industry lobbyist Andrew Wheeler to head the EPA. These politicians torpedoed the best hopes of having our representatives take adequate remedial action. The Trump administration and Republican politicians in Congress were obtuse in climate destabilization denialism, so it is heartening that President Biden made good on investing in cleaner energy and combating climate change by passing the Inflation Reduction Act, which included record amounts of funding for climate action.

One of the biggest problems in the world preventing right action is the excessive influence of greed-driven exploiters, confidence men, peddlers of absolute certainty in religious fictions, and "merchants of doubt" that sow uncertainty about the most important understandings found in scientific knowledge.

Merchants of Doubt is a documentary film about corporations that cultivate uncertainties and stimulate doubts in order to allow corporate entities to continue maximizing private profits through the scurrilous expediency of socializing costs and foisting them onto people not involved in the consumption of the products produced. The film was brilliantly created with a "flashy framing device" that featured a card-trick magician named Jamy Ian Swiss who drew parallels between the mechanisms behind conjuring tricks and those used to engage in mass manipulation.

The film focuses on the deceptive strategies of spin, obfuscation, deflection and distraction that have been used by powerful corporate interests, including cigarette manufacturers and fossil fuel lobbyists.

By using sensationally creative visuals of a magician and his slight-of-hand tricks throughout this investigation into manipulative schemes, the film's producers highlighted many of the corporate ploys that are employed to obstruct smarter and more broadly beneficial national planning. In particular, the film deals with the tobacco industry and its 50-year-long tactics of denying the hazards of smoking cigarettes, which allowed them to continue maximizing profits off the harms caused.

Stunningly, many of the very same public relations operatives and highly compensated lawyers for the tobacco industry have subsequently been in the employ of fossil fuel industries, helping the schemers sow doubt about climate change, and thereby delay action that should be taken to ameliorate this existential challenge of a destabilized climate.

Wrote one film reviewer: "There is nothing in Robert Kenner's *Merchants of Doubt*, his follow-up documentary to 2008's fascinating exposé of corporate malfeasance in the food sector, *Food Inc.*, that we disagree with, or even want to weakly rebut. Nothing. The fluidly-argued points flow with flawless logic one into the other, and the manner in which he traces the strategies used currently by vested interests in defense of their bottom lines, straight back to the playbook set out by Big Tobacco in the 1950s, is irrefutable and wholly convincing, especially when presented in so enjoyably arch and ironic a manner. We vehemently agreed, laughed along at the more incredible and egregious fallacies highlighted, and felt every single other member of the audience at our Goteborg International Film Festival screening doing the same."

The rest of this film review, written by Jessica Kiang for *The Playlist*, is well worth pondering, for it contains some surprising twists, and it deals interestingly with bigger complexities of the daunting issue of the climate crisis that confronts us. Look it up online -- *Review: Documentary 'Merchants Of Doubt' Preaches to the Choir.*

Public Policy Conundrums Require Clear Vision and Common Purpose

Nothing is simple. Destructive natural disasters make us aware of the conundrum of how we should best handle these costly occurrences. Years ago, a plan prevailed that required people who live in areas prone to flooding to buy flood insurance, so that risks of flood damage would be spread across everyone who lives in such areas. The people who live in high-risk areas would thereby contribute to paying for the costs of inevitable flood damages. This idea resulted in a National Flood Insurance Program being established in 1968, a plan that was rationalized as a way to save taxpayers' money. But good intentions can be perverted into bad plans when there is not enough attention paid to outcomes and unintended consequences. Consider this National Flood Insurance plan. Instead of paying out huge amounts of emergency funds whenever a coastal area or a river floodplain was inundated, the federal government figured it was more prudent to identify high-risk areas and require people who lived there to buy insurance and thus pay for some of the inevitable damages themselves.

This program was a part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It has unfortunately malfunctioned by rewarding people who choose to build in risky flood zones. Odd outcomes have resulted. As one example, the federal government has shelled out a total of \$2 million over the years to repeatedly rebuild a flood-ravaged home in the town of Humble, Texas -- which has an assessed value of only \$116,000. Another home, in Wilkinson County, Mississippi that is worth about \$70,000 has been flooded 34 times since 1978, and the National Flood Insurance Program has paid more than \$650,000 to fix it. It is ridiculous to continue paying for "repetitive-loss properties" like this. Are our representatives incapable of sensibly reforming anything?

On the other hand, Congress was forced to approve more than \$60 billion for relief efforts related to Superstorm Sandy, and Hurricane Katrina damage costs totaled well over \$100 billion, and the total costs of hurricane damages in 2017 far exceeded these numbers. These federally financed amounts dwarf the losses of the National Flood Insurance Program. Let's demand that our representatives collaborate together to find better ways of covering costs of natural disasters!

Examining The Federal Reserve

Something's going on here, and what it is ain't exactly unclear. Why did the Federal Reserve, which is basically the private central bank of the United States, hold interest rates near zero for so long, and so often engaged in economic hyper-stimulus by making trillions of dollars of bond purchases? Why?

The answer is to be found in inequitable social policies. If our national policies had not been so focused on increasing the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, the majority of Americans would be better off, so they could afford to buy more products and services. This would have stimulated economic activities, so the number of unemployed people would have dropped more quickly after the 2008 recession, and deficits would have shrunk, and we could have afforded to invest more in a more stable, rational, fair and sustainable future.

The Fed's actions are, in a sense, compensatory actions required to make up for the failures of Congress to act to create a fairer and healthier society (and to constrain inflation). Divisive political polarization once again can be seen to be a cancer in our society that is wreaking havoc on people and subverting the greater good.

This is a sensational realization. The simple reason that so much artificial stimulus is required is because our national priorities have undermined the real stimulus inherent in higher pay and social investments fairly financed by a more steeply graduated system of taxation that raises more money to improve the general welfare. If we were to increase the federal minimum wage tomorrow, and enact far-reaching progressive tax reform that is favorable to working people and small businesses, and weren't so negligent toward "forgotten people", the results would be very positive for most Americans.

The Smart Way Forward

Balanced priorities are vital. It is misguided for politicians to have shifted from efforts to stimulate the economy and address unemployment to primary efforts to cut government spending in the years after the 2008 financial crisis. In his book *End This Depression Now!*, Paul Krugman, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, made a convincing case that this shift in focus was indeed a wrongheaded priority.

John Maynard Keynes defined a depression as "a chronic condition of subnormal activity for a considerable period without any marked tendency either towards recovery or towards collapse." Paul Krugman attributed the Great Recession economic malaise to a classic Keynesian "liquidity trap." In this situation, a private sector with too much debt is intent on rebuilding its savings, so that even interest rates of zero cannot tempt it to borrow and spend enough to get the economy working again at full capacity. So a good remedy during hard times is a classic Keynesian one of the government making up for the lack of private spending by expending money on needed projects. During periods of strong economic growth, in contrast, government deficit spending should be responsibly reduced by higher tax rates on the top dogs.

High rates of unemployment reduce tax revenues and create an increased risk of social instability. High rates of joblessness among people under the age of 25 can be especially destabilizing. In the U.S. in 2013, about 16% of those under 25 were unemployed; in Ireland it was about 30%; in Italy and Portugal it was about 40%; and in Spain and Greece it exceeded a stunning 55%. In the Arab world, unemployment rates were also very high, so this was a contributory factor to the violent unrest of the so-called "Arab Spring", which morphed into dangerous turmoil and instability and terrible civil wars in Syria and Yemen. These statistics may be mind numbing, but the hardships associated with them are viscerally real to hundreds of millions of young adults.

While the goal of imposing austerity measures by slashing government spending may have a heroic-defiant appeal to it, it can be seen that such plans may be an exceedingly poor idea!

May Day 2020 perspective: The private sector loves cheap or free money from the federal government. This is why there was such an amazing stampede by Small Businesses and powerful big corporate entities to grab a share of the emergency recovery funds that a conflicted-loyalties Congress precipitously made available due to the calamitous coronavirus economic shock in 2020.

Riff on Paul Ryan

Consider the fact that Paul Ryan was chosen to lead the dysfunctionally conflicted Republican majority in the House of Representatives in late October 2015. Some say he was chosen because he was the "most earnest looking" of the fractious partisans. Judging by how obsequiously Ryan pandered to narrow constituencies, this variety of earnestness was not a virtue. The constituencies he primarily pandered to, in addition to wealthy conservatives and giant corporations and fossil fuel industries and the National Rifle Association, were intolerant religious fundamentalists who oppose the reproductive rights of women and civil rights of gay persons. All of these factions seem to work overtime to undermine fair representation of the best interests of the vast majority of Americans.

Appearing earnest may be an asset for a cunning politician who is selling a dishonest, disingenuous and deeply devious agenda to vulnerable citizens. A fair evaluation of the consequential impacts of Ryan's agenda would have shed a bright spotlight on the true nature of such ideological ruses. Regressive changes in national tax plans

concentrate wealth even more unconscionably in the hands of the richest 1%, and force austerity measures on everyone else. It is a Big Lie that Republican plans like this are the best way to stimulate economic growth, for businesses rely on strong demand to create jobs, and when the financial well-being of most Americans is reduced, it has a chilling effect on their ability to buy the products and services that are being offered.

Worst of all, by focusing national priorities on hot button issues and cutting spending on Medicare and Medicaid programs, Paul Ryan failed to focus on more important issues. He refused to deal honestly with growing inequality and the decreasing economic security of the majority of Americans. He ignored risks of allowing big corporations to continue externalizing large costs onto society to help the richest people grab a bigger monopoly on profits and the nation's wealth. He distracted people's attention from growing existential dangers of activities that destabilized the climate and contributed to related natural disasters. And he tried to deny women reproductive rights.

With a flourish of earnest-sounding conservative proposals, Paul Ryan proclaimed the ideas that are most important to him and his wealthy supporters, who give huge sums of money to Republican politicians and narrowly-focused Super PACS. He thereby used institutional bribery sanctioned by the Supreme Court to impose retrogressive and stubbornly anti-progressive plans on the American people. Since these are prescriptions that suspiciously coincide closely with the agenda of right-wing billionaires, it is obvious that they are designed to rig the economy and politics ever more extremely in their greedy favor.

A few years after those words were written, Donald Trump seized power and lockstep-marching Republican politicians made all these problems rashly worse.

Bush's Brain Reveals Bizarre Propensities

It would be a good idea for us to understand the marvelous micro-circuitry of our brains a bit better. In 2013, the Obama administration proposed a major scientific effort to better understand the human brain, and to map its activity in a way similar to the Human Genome Project in genetics.

Let's evaluate a statement made by President Bush in 2003. He told some Palestinian leaders at the time, "I'm driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, <George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan.> And I did. And then God would tell me, <George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq.> And I did."

Why is it, the ghost of Mark Twain wonders, that when God supposedly communicated with the likes of George W. Bush, the Supreme Eminence always seemed to manifest the ideologically self-serving prejudices of the hearer's dark inner self? How could it be that God communicated personally with people like Mormon founder Joseph Smith and religious evangelist Pat Robertson and "born-again" George W. Bush -- and gave each of them such self-serving directives? It's as if the assertions of these dissemblers are either outrageous outright fabrications or astonishing delusions that reveal narrow prejudices and "confirmation biases". How gullible do these characters think people are? Mark Twain weighs in: "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand."

A sense of humor, being born of perspective, bears a near kinship to philosophy. So let's laugh at the follies of leaders like Joseph Smith, who claimed God told him he could marry as many young wives as he could handle (apparently about 33). Let's laugh at every instance that God reputedly reveals a spiteful prejudice against women's reproductive prerogatives or the human rights of gay people. And let's laugh out loud at the supposition that God has ever really told anyone to launch a bloody war of aggression. Let's allow the healing power of this mirth to inoculate us against a belief in the next messianic madman who comes along preaching some odd gospel containing germs of self-serving behaviors that just happen to be terribly contrary to the greater good.

Much mischief has been done throughout history in the name of God and *Under the Banner of Heaven*. Even unsophisticated Huck Finn would have seen straight away that faith-filled folks are often delusional or dishonest with themselves (and others). When apologists among them deceive people by rationalizing harms, they deserve Dante's condemnation that would consign them to the deepest depths of Hell forevermore for their treacherous actions. We sometimes irrationally misperceive the world around us, particularly when issues are oversimplified or we seek to confirm our beliefs without questioning them. For these reasons, I like this wise piece of advice: "Don't believe everything you think!"

Our opinions are deeply subjective. Absolute truths do not exist. Good and bad are relative. When people hold opposing viewpoints, neither one is absolutely right or wrong. When disagreements occur over national policies and priorities, perhaps the best answer is to be found in the middle of a Bell Curve-like distribution of all people's individual ways of seeing the issue. There is often a surprisingly profound intelligence in crowds, as James Surowiecki makes clear in *The Wisdom of Crowds*.

This is one reason that I believe in fair-minded 50-50 compromises on many substantive issues where sincere partisans hold contrary opinions. Good proposals lie ahead. If a dedicated group of people holds a brainstorming session and comes up with the fairest win/win solution to a problem, then let that be the one we adopt.

Reflections on More Hot Button Issues

A minority of Americans supports the death penalty. In light the hundreds of cases where innocent people have been exonerated by DNA evidence after years in prison, this issue should be examined more closely. It is not a pro-life stance to support the death penalty, just as it is likewise not a pro-life attitude to oppose a good universal healthcare plan and far-reaching reforms of our medical insurance system, because such opposition results in thousands of unnecessary deaths every year. Also, it seems clear that religious zealotry has caused great grief in the world. Since the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11, 2001, Islamic religious fanatics have provoked an extremely expensive military retaliation in the form of a crusade against terrorism that has cost trillions of dollars and numerous lives.

Conservative American evangelicals have joined war hawks in stoking reactionary opposition to Islam, and taken stands against secular progressivism. Dark passions have been exploited to divide and conquer, and cunning demagogues have scapegoated immigrants, liberals and gay people to advance an unrelated underlying agenda of things like undermining universal healthcare plans and the collective bargaining power of workers. The real underlying purpose of these initiatives has been to gain power and control, and to get away with maximizing corporate profits at the public's expense.

Some evangelical religious fanatics in U.S. churches are nearly as odious as the suicide bombers who target innocent victims. The International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, for instance, is an evangelical institution that preaches hate of gay men and lesbian women in the guise of love for Jesus and obedience to God's authority. Who knew that God hates, when so many spiritual leaders have preached that God is love?

The documentary film *God Loves Uganda* provides a startling insight into conservative evangelical fanaticism in some U.S. churches. Leaders of the International House of Prayer helped get a law passed in Uganda against homosexuals that condemns some gay people to death. When Americans contribute to the demonization and harm of people in other countries by stoking anti-gay feelings abroad, we are acting with pathetic resolve that directly hurts other people. And when the "good news" of the Word of God is used to stoke anti-gay attitudes in male-dominated African societies, this "kill the homosexuals" ideology is disgusting to countless people worldwide, probably even more so than the idea of men having sex with each other is disgusting to these narrow-minded, self-righteous religious zealots. How could these indoctrinated believers have discovered words in the Bible that condemn homosexuals and yet missed the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill?"

Very few mentions of homosexuality are made in the Bible. Jesus does not say anything about the subject. Jesus does say however, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." When Jesus spoke to a crowd about a woman who had committed adultery, which the Old Testament says is a sin that should be punished by being stoned to death, Jesus supposedly said in John 8:7, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

Women are still being stoned to death for adultery in some cultures. This is horribly wrong. Uganda's history since its dictator Idi Amin was deposed in 1979 is a tragic story. In the power vacuum that followed Idi Amin's flight into exile, Uganda was exceptionally vulnerable to the indoctrination of its people by missionaries. Recognizing this, the International House of Prayer made a commitment to a crusade against gay people, apparently hoping to inflame religious passions enough that the church would be able to advance abstinence-only, anti-contraception, anti-family-planning, anti-abortion and anti-gay ideologies. This East African country has a tellingly high poverty rate, and its people have almost the youngest median age of any country on Earth -- 16 years old. In contrast, the median age in

the U.S. is about 39 years old. In a sense, conservative evangelicals in the U.S. are pathologically trying to take advantage of young Africans to advance their selfish and noxious religious agenda.

Rodney King was a black man who became nationally known after a videotape revealed him being beaten with excessive force by Los Angeles police officers in 1991. A trial ensued, and the police officers involved were judged innocent despite the shocking video evidence. Terrible riots immediately followed, and more than 50 people were killed, and billions of dollars in property damage was done. Rodney King was aghast, and famously asked, more or less, "Can't we all just get along?" I believe we could easily all get along much better, and the key is to create greater social fairness, a more truly fair system of justice, and a more definite commitment to social cohesion, peaceable coexistence and human rights and dignity for all.

"Be in harmony. Live in Peace. If you are out of balance, take inspiration from manifestations of your true inner self. Those who have ears let them hear."

--- The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

A Brief Catechism

The symbol of a fish, by a stroke of coincidence, is a hallmark of Christianity, the most widespread religion on Earth. The Latin root of the word religion is *religio*, meaning to *bond together*. Humanity has an overarching existential need to bond together in a far-reaching and conscientious devotion to a more responsible stewardship of creation. This need is growing, along with increasing human numbers and intensifying demands on resources and ecosystem services and the "carbon sink capacity" of the biosphere. All religions should strive for a common bond of peaceful coexistence by coming together to give much higher priority to helping satisfy this transcendent obligation. We should become downright evangelical or practically puritanical in this duty, in the sense of seeking to judiciously inspire this ultimate righteous moral code for our kind as a whole in the long term. Weigh in with a more respectable wholeheartedness on issues like this, again and again, Pope Francis!

The Story Behind the Story

Psychologists have studied the values and ideologies that differentiate the political left and the political right for many years. This research consistently identifies two antithetical value systems that have contrasting understandings of freedom, propriety, the individual, government, right and wrong, and the common good. These perspectives become entrenched in partisan politics, and create an adversarial "argument culture" in which blaming others is typical in public discourse, and some see compromise as weakness. This is especially apparent in news coverage on Fox News, which is an echo chamber of conservative spin that hijacks viewers' emotions and sabotages domestic tranquility. Their manipulative content contrasts pathetically to progressive programming like that on MSNBC, which features astute analysis by Rachel Maddow, Chris Hayes and many others.

The organization Project Censored tracks the top stories that are inadequately covered by corporate media outlets. In its annual report, *Censored 2013, Dispatches from the Media Revolution*, the authors observed: "Polarized thinking is typical of the dynamics between competing sides in many conflicts. One side -- the innovators -- identifies a set of problems and promotes ideas or policies to address them. Standing in distinct opposition, traditionalists identify with the current system, and feel allegiance to its strengths. Traditionalists see shortcomings in innovators' plans and seek to preserve the old ways."

These Project Censored insights have given rise to the concept of "polarity management". Its goal is to identify and fully integrate the strengths and weaknesses of all sides, rather than blaming one side or the other. Such a process of mediation encourages disputants to examine the weaknesses of their own positions and the strengths of others, so that solutions can be devised that address the issues that each party has, and their respective needs and fears. Sensible polarity management is an excellent idea, but it faces the hurdle that our political representatives do not really seem to be all that interested in solutions in the heat of their partisan strife and fierce competition to get money to assure they can get elected, and reelected to stay in power.

There are surely better ways forward. It seems obvious that evidence and facts should be evaluated fairly, and decisions should be made accordingly. Our polarized politics has definitely led to some undesirable outcomes. A main one is that our great American experiment in democracy is suffering a series of existential crises. Congress

created a pathetic succession of "fiscal crises" starting in 2008 that caused a loss of an estimated 2 million jobs. In a study commissioned by the conservative deficit hawk Pete Peterson, it was revealed that economic growth in the U.S. was constrained by fiscal-cliff and debt-ceiling emergencies and the poorly-targeted 5% annual cut in federal spending that was forced by the resulting "sequester". According to William Falk, editor-in-chief of *The Week* magazine, "America's economy, in other words, is being actively sabotaged, and such self-destructive behavior is anything but conservative. Vigorous growth would flood the Treasury with tax dollars and shrink the deficit." People like Sam Brownback, I wrote some years ago of a Kansas schemer, pay attention!

Hear William Falk's conclusions: "One of the flaws of democracy is that a small group of angry zealots can exert outsized influence. Just 18 percent of the U.S. population is represented by the congressmen who forced the latest debt-ceiling crisis (in October 2013), but these extremists have intimidated Republican leaders, who value their own jobs more than yours. Most Americans are not intensely partisan, so when the crazies turn government into a bar fight and the broken bottles and chairs fly, the silent majority simply duck and become chagrined spectators. Disapproval, however, may not be sufficient to end the sabotage. Perhaps it's time for the other 82 percent to get good and mad."

Anger, unfortunately, is often exploited by dangerous demagogues to promote prescriptions that are contrary to fair and smart planning, and that is exactly what happened to allow Donald Trump to seize power.

Politics in Recent Years

"The election is over. The story is not." Mitt Romney tried to sell the American people an amped-up version of the policies of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. These policies would have been decidedly harmful to workers, women, children, students, the environment, future generations, and most species of life on Earth. The tax plans proposed by Romney and Paul Ryan were regressive, because they were designed to give rich people an even bigger slice of the economic pie and simultaneously slash spending on a wide variety of programs that benefit Americans who are financially insecure. Then Trump used egregious tactics to grab power, as spelled out in *Demagoguery and the Dangers of the Demise of Democracy*, and his cunning administration tried to take healthcare away from millions of people -- and imposed highly regressive debt-financed tax cut plans on the American people.

How is it possible that Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan in 2012 and so many MAGA Republican politicians today can be so brazen in proposing to slash spending on social safety net programs in order to give even lower tax rates to people who earn the highest levels of income? The main reasons for this potential political kamikaze act is that our democracy has become so corrupted and obedient to the demands of the top 2% of income earners that politicians from both political parties give top priority to accommodating the dictates of moneyed interests. In doing so, they appear to be able to get away with radically under-representing the interests of the majority.

As a result of Republican tax cuts, a travesty of social justice is taking place in which the rich are getting richer while the nation is falling apart, public schools are deteriorating, our leaders are poorly prepared to deal with contagious disease outbreaks, many inner cities are getting grittier, prisons are dangerously and unjustly overcrowded, and tens of millions of Americans are seeing their prospects in life diminish.

How is it possible that the Republican Party has supported such socially negative outcomes? Well, times have changed since Eisenhower spoke words in 1954 about a "tiny splinter group" being "stupid" by opposing social programs. Way back then, we were still in the near aftermath of World War II, when the American people had come together to make shared sacrifices in the global effort to ensure democracy would triumph over fascist aggressors. Today, our democracy has degenerated into an oligarchy ruled by moneyed interests, and selfish rich people are refusing to concede any of their privileges or influence.

Since our Congressional, Executive and judicial systems are so strongly influenced by the corrupting influence of Big Money, the greater good is being undermined and fair representation of the interests of the majority are being subverted. As a result, radically anti-egalitarian initiatives have gained sway. Our corporate-dominated media machine is partly to blame for this undesirable state of affairs, because it is too much influenced by marketing, advertising budgets, propaganda and ideologies of corporate interests and right-wing front groups.

Just after the 2012 election, Mitt Romney complained to top donors that President Obama had won the contest by

giving gifts to women, blacks, Hispanics and young people. He disingenuously failed to mention the much larger multi-trillion dollar gifts that the Republican Party has given to rich people by radically reducing taxes on the highest levels of income in the past four decades. We would do well to remember that government "gifts" given to anyone today are coming at the expense of people in the future. To be more responsible for the societal greater good, we need fiscal discipline and a reformed political system, so that our national priorities are fairer and more responsibly oriented to the longer term.

Republicans have been trying to convince people for decades that everyone in the U.S. will do better only when rich people pay lower taxes, but it must be repeated: everyone will do better only when everyone does better. This truth is downright tautological. In Matthew 19:24 of the Bible, it says: "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel (a cable?) to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

During his business career, Mitt Romney routinely took advantage of the rigged provisions of the capitalist system to make huge profits by using no-value-added "vulture capitalist" schemes and tax evasion swindles. He acted in ruthless, shrewdly calculating, cold-hearted ways in his hedge fund dealings and debt-leveraging gambits. He subsequently tried to spin the story of his career into a narrative that portrayed him as a person primarily interested in creating jobs, and who really cared about workers and the middle class. He tried to act like he is an honorable nice guy who is fair-minded and reasonable. But these characterizations turned out to be transparently inaccurate. Then along came the drastically more unscrupulous con man Donald Trump, who has been cataclysmically less ethical than Mitt Romney in his pursuit of power, and Romney has surprisingly come to be markedly more honorable than Trump and his enablers and MAGA cult followers.

Romney's many policy flip-flops and his slick rhetoric were overwhelmingly motivated by selfish advantages, not by broad-mindedness. By covering up the details of his tax returns during his run for president, and hiding details he may have had of his fiscal plans for the U.S., and disingenuously concealing his true agenda if he were to have gained power, he gave people good cause to doubt his honesty and integrity. We could not have afforded to gamble that a good Mitt would have shown up in the White House rather than a conniving, exploitive, aggressively self-interested, inequality-championing Mitt. And no one knew for sure what kind of Trump would show up if he were to be elected, but once we found out, it was a very costly unmitigated and deadly disaster!

A Bizarre Development

A secretly-taped video surfaced in mid-September 2012 that featured Mitt Romney talking to supporters at a private \$50,000 per person fund-raising dinner. In the video, he declared that his job is "not to worry about" the 47% of Americans who pay no income tax. In the video, he conflated "47% of the people who will vote for the president (Obama) no matter what" with 47% of people who pay no income taxes, and he expressed disdain that bordered on contempt for the 47% of Americans "who are dependent on government, who believe that they are victims ... who believe they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it."

Embarrassed by the revealing attitudes he expressed to his well-heeled supporters in the video, but unyielding, he defended his statement the next day, conceding only that perhaps it was "not elegantly stated". Inelegance, Mr. Romney, was not the problem. It was not merely an unfortunate choice of words; it was a poor choice of schemes and ideological convictions. It was, in particular, a really poor choice of words and beliefs for a rich guy to profess in his attitude toward the middle class and working poor. Conservative columnist David Brooks provided a damning perspective about the Romney video. "The people who receive the disproportionate share of government spending are not big-government lovers. They are Republicans. They are senior citizens. They are white men with high school degrees. As Bill Galston of the Brookings Institution has noted, the people who have benefitted from the entitlements explosion are middle-class workers, more so than the dependent poor."

Romney's words reflected a glib eagerness to oversimplify issues, and to distort them to try to make them conform to his unapologetic capitalist worldview. One problem with his hewing to corporate economic orthodoxy is that it represents a basically untenable position of advocating a doubling-down on the regressive and unsustainable tax policies of the Bush era. Another big problem is that it is difficult to sell unempathetic "you're on your own economics" to people who are struggling so traumatically with economic hard times. Romney's attitude seemed so

out of touch and narrowly self-serving, and surely the vast majority of Americans would be better served by leaders who are better stewards of the public interest!

The video was sensational because it showed Romney launching a hostile salvo against millions of Americans who he was trying to dupe into supporting him. It turns out that half of the nearly 47% of Americans who pay no income taxes don't earn enough money to owe any tax. Most of the rest who pay no income taxes receive tax credits that offset their meager incomes because they are senior citizens, low-income parents, or working poor people. Many military veterans are among the 47%. Revealingly, the top ten states where these 47% live are in the South, where Republican Governors preside over economic policy in states like Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina. There are also, curiously, 4,000 households that earn more than \$1 million per year in this 47% of Americans. Somehow these people twist the tax code into a selfish tax-free triumph.

The President should be responsible for serving all Americans, and should not abandon large segments of the populace in pandering to the Party base. "Personally," concluded David Brooks, "I think Romney's a kind, decent man who says stupid things because he is pretending to be something he is not -- some sort of cartoonish government-hater." Peggy Noonan, a conservative Wall Street Journal columnist and former speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, described Romney's campaign as "a rolling calamity." Rush Limbaugh offered his own sinister advice: "Go ideological!" He wanted Mitt to pander more slavishly to the extreme right. He apparently believes Romney hadn't gone far enough toward the extreme ideologies of the "loony-tunes" crowd. Did Trump prove that Limbaugh was right? More accurately: Go demagogic, and damn ethics and morality!

Mitt, trying to avoid providing specific details of his envisioned policies, once declared, "The devil is in the details. The angel is in the policies." If that's true, the angel policies are arguably the ones that make the lives of most people more secure, NOT the policies that unjustly merely make the rich richer. The right policies are the best plan, NOT the far right policies!

One of the Tea Party darlings at the 2012 Republican National Convention was Florida Senator Marco Rubio. Listen to his speech at the RNC at the time: "Our national motto is 'In God We Trust', reminding us that faith in our Creator is the most important American value of all." Is this value more important than honesty, personal freedoms, the protection of children, peaceful coexistence, protections of the environment, reducing poverty, and caring about others, including people in future generations? In 2016, Rubio ran to become President, but was steamrolled by the conniving Trumpster just like all other Republican competitors -- and all other Americans.

Marco Rubio's attitude was divisive, and unlikely to help us form a more perfect Union. There is a good reason that when politicians take their oaths of office, they place their hand on the Bible and swear to uphold the U.S. Constitution, and that they DO NOT put their hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible. A robust separation of church and state is an important principle for peaceable coexistence and democratic fairness.

News Flash: U.S. Poverty Hits Record High

The 2010 census revealed that poverty in the U.S. reached the worst level since the census began tracking poverty in 1959. The census showed that more than 45 million Americans lived in poverty at that time. Conservative radio talk show hosts reacted to this news by reverberating with doubts about how these measurements were derived. But come on! Serious social problems are implicated, and we need to find ways that we can agree on to create a truly fairer society.

It turns out that societies that are dominated by a wealthy few often become increasingly insecure due to the injustice-driven instability of this domineering and anti-egalitarian treatment of the masses. When well-being is more widely shared, outcomes are generally better for all concerned. Again I recall John Steinbeck's observation in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* about how ideas gain little power or traction until they find the fertile soil of discontent to grow in. When ideas are planted in such unease, they germinate into emotion -- or even religious fervor. We are witnessing an intensification of dissatisfaction and alienation in the U.S. and in nations around the world, and these feelings are accompanied by valid grievances and heightened social conflicts -- and then the global pandemic. These dangerous impulses are stoked in many ways by empathy deficient gambits of the rich against fairer policies and against more steeply graduated (progressively-structured) taxation.

John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts had debated and articulated valuable and holistic worldviews during their famous voyage on the Sea of Cortez in 1940. One conclusion they reached was that to see things clearly and with keen insight is a prerequisite to breaking through to fuller understandings of situations or concepts. John Steinbeck believed it is vital to see things whole and to work purposefully to change the way things are -- and to strive to improve social conditions for the better of all.

An enthusiasm for exploration has led me to a specific breakthrough in understanding. The insightful linguist George Lakoff points the way. He says that when empathy is activated in people's minds, it tends to strengthen support for progressive worldviews. In contrast, when fears are activated in people's minds, it tends to strengthen support for conservative worldviews. Awareness of this fact should help us achieve truer interpretations of reality, and to set doctrinaire perspectives aside in favor of more honest and accurate awareness. The kernel of insight in this perspective could help us transform our cultures.

Factors Involved in the Increasing U.S. National Debt

Rep. Tim Scott of South Carolina was appointed by Republican Governor Nikki Haley to fill a vacancy in the Senate left by the resignation of Tea Party conservative Senator Jim DeMint at the end of 2012. Tim Scott is a Tea Party adherent, so one of the first things he did upon hearing of his appointment was to parrot a popular Tea Party talking point: "We have a spending problem in America, ladies and gentlemen, not a revenue problem."

This dogmatic simplification of the situation is ridiculous and deluded. We unquestionably have BOTH spending problems in the United States AND problems with insufficient revenues. The combination of these two problems can be directly measured by the titanic budget shortfalls that have occurred since Bill Clinton actually achieved a budget surplus in the 2000-2001 fiscal year. Both problems have unquestionably contributed to risk-laden increases in the national debt.

As can be seen, the excessive spending problem is made worse by wrongheaded priorities, perverse incentives, misguided policies, absurd loopholes, poorly controlled military spending, fraud, overly generous "entitlements", waste and huge expenses incurred due to cost-externalizing gambits by giant multinational corporations.

Inadequate revenue problems are made worse by highly preferential tax treatment of high-income earners and a national pastime of tax evasion by corporations, rich people, real estate speculators and many others. Huge sums of money are being lost to corporate tax scams, tax loopholes, tax cheating, and effective rates of tax that are historically low on corporate earnings, dividends and capital gains, and on the highest categories of income and on inheritances. Big corporations are paying the lowest percent of the federal budget today than they have since 1980, and the people with the highest incomes are paying tax rates that are nearly the lowest on the highest levels of incomes since the Roaring Twenties.

These circumstances have caused our national debt to become the largest of any nation in history. One might think we would come together to honestly address this state of affairs, but there is little sign that our leaders are anywhere near taking reasonable steps toward balancing the budget.

In a 12/30/12 editorial, *Why the Economy Needs Tax Reform*, the New York Times magnanimously referred to the notion that economic and budget goals can be achieved by spending cuts alone as a "persistent Republican myth." The heirs of Mark Twain's satiric wit would ridicule this notion by less charitably calling it a far-fetched delusion or an outright Big Lie. The pressures of a steadily aging population and increasing costs for healthcare, along with vital needs to make smart investments in education, infrastructure and environmental protections, make it clear that sensible tax reform is necessary to reduce budget deficits and make our world more secure. Such tax reform would be one of the best ways to reduce rising income inequality and inequities in opportunities in our country.

Another reason that people who support the Tea Party should see that they share a common cause with people in the 99% movement is that both groups have real populist concerns. The Tea Party should look very closely at any plank in their agenda that serves mainly to advance interests of billionaires, and they should support solutions to our nation's problems that are fairer for all.

An Aside on Absurd Ideologies

The aforementioned new Senator Tim Scott is a black man who is popular with extreme conservatives. When he was appointed, it was hailed within the Republican Party as an inspired choice since he then became the first black senator from South Carolina and the first one from the South since the Reconstruction Era. When new members of Congress were sworn in on January 3, 2013, Tim Scott was the only African-American in the entire Senate.

Despite the historic nature of his appointment, many people were not impressed. "It obscures the fact that modern black Republicans have been more tokens than signs of progress," wrote Adolph L. Reed Jr. at the New York Times. He added: "Republicans will not gain significant black support unless they take policy positions that advance black interests. No number of Tim Scotts -- or other cynical tokens -- will change that."

Tim Scott seemed to have fallen hook-line-and-sinker for Tea Party dogmas that adamantly oppose fair compromises. He seems to be blind to good citizen goals and the greater good for all. By making dogmatically simplistic observations about our national spending, Scott essentially emulates the Tea Party modus operandi: they cling stubbornly to their convictions, which have a certain closed-minded quality of denial to them, and they demand that everyone in society conform to their narrow worldviews. They oppose not only people whose opinions differ from their own, but they often deny rationality, fair pragmatism, and scientific understandings as well.

I salute some Republicans for trying to be more diverse. It was appropriate in light of their smackdown in the 2012 elections. But the fact of the matter is that a greater diversity of views is needed, and more honesty and inclusivity. More broad-minded policies are called for, not just some politician here or there that is a mere token representative of a given minority. Clarence Thomas, for instance, may be a black face on the Supreme Court, but he doesn't represent a diversity of views that includes any Enlightenment Era principles or semblance of open-mindedness with regard to the average American (or honesty or integrity!). Likewise, Sarah Palin is a woman, but she advocated Tea Party positions on economic and social issues, not a wider range of fair-minded views in "a bigger tent" that gives respect to the middle class, economic fairness or reasonable reproductive rights for women.

Republicans were at least dimly aware that their repudiation in the 2012 elections was partially due to their narrow pandering to white people, corporate CEOs, rich people and fundamentalist evangelicals at the expense of fairer policies for poor people, middle class folks, women, African Americans, Latinos, immigrants and gays. Tim Scott's appointment may seem to be a recognition that Republicans were reaching out to people in racial minorities, but when they choose a politician that is a Black man who actually opposes policies beneficial to the interests of oppressed minorities, the action is much more obviously a cynical calculation than a true attempt to satisfy a broader range of interests. And Trump's triumph through strategies of using divisive rhetoric and appeals to white nationalists has done little to refute these characterizations.

----- The End -----