



Common Sense vs. Political Realities: An Anatomy of Dysfunctionality

An Earth Manifesto publication by Dr. Tiffany B. Twain
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An incisive political cartoon by Matt Davies appeared in national newspapers on January 22, 2010. The political cartoon showed a billboard with little neon lights on it that read BOB IS A JERK. A blimp floated overhead with a sign on it that said GET A LIFE BOB. A bus going past this scene had one of those international traffic signs on the back with a red slash across the name BOB. A political ad on the side of the bus read BOB IS WRONG. Off to one side, a perplexed-looking Bob stands next to a woman, and he is saying to her:

**"ALL I SAID WAS GIVING FREE SPEECH TO A CORPORATION
IS DIFFERENT THAN GIVING FREE SPEECH TO AN INDIVIDUAL."**

This astute political commentary was created in response to the landmark ruling a day earlier by the Supreme Court that overturned long-standing legal precedents designed to limit the powerful and highly unfair influence of Big Money in our elections. This decision in *Citizens United vs. the Federal Election Commission* declared that it is more-or-less unconstitutional for representatives of the American people to put restrictions on the rights of cash-rich corporations to influence elections. This decision is wrongheaded!

This ruling overturned campaign finance laws that sensibly restricted corporate spending in elections. Eighty-nine-year-old Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, one of the four Justices who disagreed with the ruling, read his dissent aloud to give additional emphasis to his words. He noted that the decision "rejected the common sense of the American people, who have fought against the distinctive corrupting potential of corporate electioneering since the days of Theodore Roosevelt."

The purpose of this essay is to develop a big picture perspective on current events and the lessons of history and experience, and to make a call to action for Americans to stand up and demand that our representatives actually work to improve our societies and make them healthier and more just. One of the best ways to accomplish this would be to find ways to prevent established interest groups from getting special short-term-oriented advantages for themselves at the public expense. At the same time, steps should be taken to prevent these groups from undermining the financial health of our nation or unduly harming the environment or damaging our hopes for a fairer and more peaceful world.

A Healthy Solution is Proposed Right Here

The attractive chef Giada De Laurentiis has a morning routine that makes her feel good; she drinks two glasses of warm water with fresh lemon juice the first thing every morning, then does some yoga stretches, and then dunks her face in a sink filled with ice water. This invigorating routine definitely appears to work well for her, and if this healthy routine is responsible for her youthful appearance, along with her exuberant enthusiasm and impressive poise, I heartily endorse it. I myself spent many years finishing a hot shower with a brief cold one, and in such an invigorated state, let's give wing to the imagination.

Visualize me composing these words, often pondering deeply like a feminine and lighthearted version of Rodin's *The Thinker*. Here I am, smiling broadly at intervals, in touch with the irony and absurdity of my hopes to help

humanity overcome the overwhelmingly powerful ossified inertia of the status quo and the dark turns it has taken in the past few years. I again recall that Niccolo Machiavelli, the most famous and infamous political strategist in all of history, knew the true nature of affairs, as succinctly stated in his observation:

"It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institutions, and merely lukewarm defenders of those who would gain by the new ones."

Then again, signs of bright hope are everywhere, standing out from the ominously dark background of stubborn intransigence. There's Annie Leonard, for instance, the straight-speaking educator who created some simple, easily accessible animated videos in her provocatively illuminating *Story of Stuff* series (this was before she assumed her current role as Executive Director of Greenpeace USA.) Her ideas in *The Story of Stuff* and *The Story of Change* and *The Story of Broke*, I speculated a few years ago, could help revolutionize our world.

Annie Leonard's *Story of Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* told "the story behind the *Story of Stuff*." After briefing online viewers on the problems associated with excessive corporate spending in our elections, she observes:

"It's easy to get angry, but it's time we get smart and realize that the heart of our problem is not that we have bad lawmakers, but that we have a democracy in crisis. Eighty-five percent of Americans believe that corporations have too much power, and people have too little. Eighty-five percent! Hey, that's a majority!"

All it would take, as the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once made clear, would be for a small subset of people to watch these marvelous videos and understand the truths they contain, and to get motivated to help create an effective movement that would utilize these ideas to get our self-interest-obsessed and vested-interest-prepossessed representatives to act in the interests of the greater good.

Annie Leonard calls for a big and ambitious goal of ratifying a smart and clear new Constitutional Amendment that guarantees *We the People* more influence in our government by restricting the outsized influence of corporations. "I get that amending the Constitution is a big, ambitious goal, but it is not impossible. Every time huge positive change has been made in this country it is because people dreamed big, aimed high and set ambitious goals."

Capitalism, Corporatism and Anti-egalitarianism

The great American humorist and writer Mark Twain once satirically made the trenchant observation that "We have the best government that money can buy." He was definitely not giving an endorsement to the goodness of our government, or the wisdom of allowing Big Money to have a domineering influence on our politics and public decision-making.

Many indicators reveal that too much corporate money is already negatively affecting our society. The greater good is diminished when we allow our public decision-making to be dominated by the amount of money spent by vested interests to influence our national policies. We need to find ways to ensure that all people and competing interests have fair representation. One of the reasons that our economic and political systems are so unfair and dysfunctional is that rich people and giant corporations have such powerful influence to enact their own self-interested priorities.

The bottom-line confirmation of this contention is embodied in one simple fact: The wealthiest 1% of Americans own more of the total wealth in the United States than the bottom 90% combined. One percent of Americans, in other words, own more than the combined amount of everyone in the lower classes, plus everyone in the middle class, plus about half of the people in the upper class. Furthermore, the top one-tenth of 1% of Americans today earn as much as the bottom 120 million people, and the marginal tax rate on high-income individuals is near the lowest it has been in 90 years.

It is downright stupid for the U.S. to run the biggest budget deficits in world history while at the same time requiring people who are super-rich to pay such low rates of tax. This state of affairs is an outrageous affront to common sense and the common good. The marginal tax rate should be increased to prevent the extreme unfairness

of letting rich people grab most of the benefits of our economic and political systems to further enrich themselves at the public expense.

Also, since our capitalist system is set up to primarily benefit wealthy people, it is entirely reasonable to require a once-every-lifetime reckoning in which wealthy people, after they die, give back a good portion of their wealth for the greater good. Taxes on rich people's estates were gradually reduced from a top estate tax rate of 55% on estates larger than \$600,000 in 1997 to zero in 2010, and then they reverted to a top rate of 35% on portions of inheritances exceeding \$5 million in 2011. This largess was further increased to \$11 million in 2018 by the provisions of the Republican Tax Cut scam in December 2017. It would be a positive development for our nation to establish a more steeply graduated estate tax on large fortunes. Some of the revenues generated should, among other needed plans, be applied to reduce the national debt, which has been artificially inflated, in part, to ensure that rich people are able to accumulate more assets.

The dominating influence of Big Money in our society drowns out the voices of the vast majority of people. It thus has the effect of reducing the power associated with the freedom of speech for individuals, so it significantly erodes their interests. This is not what the Founders had in mind when they wrote the Bill of Rights. We are living in a new Gilded Age of disparities of wealth that is so unjust a form of inequality that it could only have come about, and could only be perpetuated, by UNFAIR representation of the people, and by the subversion of democratic ideals.

"Government must give priority to the needs of ordinary citizens, workers, consumers, students, children, the elderly, and the ill, the vulnerable and the underdog, and not to the needs of those already sufficiently powerful and affluent to afford their own lobbyists."

--- Theodore Sorensen (1928 - 2010)

I just can't help remembering the compelling observation made by Justice Louis Brandeis, a Supreme Court Justice from 1916 to 1939: "*We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both.*" Yikes! Which shall it be?

Historical Perspectives on Extremes of Economic Inequality

There is great risk even for wealthy people in being too hard-nosed toward the vast majority of people in decisions concerning economic fairness. Famed historians Will and Ariel Durant point out in *The Lessons of History* that reasonable compromises are necessary to prevent forces that advocate revolutionary change from acting to overthrow the privileged class when the concentration of wealth becomes too starkly unfair. Rich people would be wise to learn to be more open to fairly compromising and sharing wealth a little more broadly. Otherwise, more severe unrest will erupt and wealth will eventually be likely to be destroyed rather than being more broadly distributed. No amount of devious propaganda or military distractions or harsh repression or prison incarcerations will, in the long run, be adequate to make a society fairer.

Many instances in history demonstrate that too extreme a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and too large a gap between the wealthiest people and the poorest, creates a dangerously unstable situation. Such a state of affairs should sensibly be offset by legislation that partially "redistributes" wealth. Redistribution is a dirty word in America these days, but as certain as the sun was shining in my window the morning I recorded these words, the initiatives that Ronald Reagan implemented during his tenure in the White House have acted to redistribute the wealth upward to rich people, and especially to the richest 1% of Americans. Without an improved modicum of fairness in national policies, the risks rise of a revolutionary insurrection that would have a net effect of partially redistributing poverty. Warren Buffet would probably concur with this assessment, and accordingly he has repeatedly called for immediate increases in taxes on what he called the "coddled" super-rich.

In ancient Athens of 594 BCE, the gap between rich and poor reached too great an extreme, and poor people were faced with deteriorating conditions. Corrupt courts, to make matters worse, tended to decide every issue against the powerless poor, so violent conflicts seemed inevitable. Good sense prevailed, however, when moderate elements secured the election of Solon, a wise businessman of aristocratic lineage. Solon instituted a number of courageous and fair-minded reforms. This included the establishment of a graduated income tax that required the rich to pay

taxes at a rate 12 times the rate required of the poor. The measures he instituted didn't please either the rich or the radical advocates for the poor, but within a generation almost everyone agreed that his reforms had saved Athens from violent revolution.

Another episode in history proved a contrasting confirmation of this central theme. The concentration of wealth and land ownership in Italy under Roman rule had reached a similarly explosive point in 133 BCE, but conservative elements in the Roman Senate were strongly opposed to fair-minded reforms, so they adopted an uncompromising course. This led to 100 years of class conflict and civil war. It was not until Caesar Augustus came to power that a "Principate" was created in which a fairer Pax Romana was maintained between the classes that lasted for two centuries. Augustus succeeded by forming coalitions and skillfully promoting peace. This showed that an era of moderation and peaceful coexistence is vastly preferable to a period of stubborn refusals to compromise.

The substance of these reflections is informed by the renowned historians Will and Ariel Durant. Think about these two eminent historians. They spent four decades of study and collaboration in writing eleven monumental volumes of *The Story of Civilization*, and then, nearing the end of their lives, they distilled the accumulated store of their knowledge and experience into *The Lessons of History*. This is their concise and almost poetic reflection on what history tells us about the nature, conduct and prospects of humankind. The Durants wrote that they were "seeking in the great lives, the great ideas, the great events of the past for the meaning of man's long journey through war, conquest and creation -- and for the great themes that can help us to understand our era."

To the Durants, history is our great human heritage: "The heritage we can now more fully transmit is richer than ever before. It is richer than that of Pericles, for it includes all the Greek flowering that followed him; richer than Leonardo's, for it embraces all the French Enlightenment and its ecumenical dissemination. If progress is truly real despite our whining, it is not because we are born healthier, better, or wiser than infants were in the past, but because we are born to a richer heritage, born on a higher level of that pedestal which the accumulation of knowledge and art raises as the ground and support of our being. The heritage rises, and man rises in proportion as he receives it."

"History is, above all else, the creation and recording of our heritage; progress is its increasing abundance, preservation, transmission, and use. To those who study history not merely as a warning reminder of man's follies and crimes, but also as an encouraging remembrance of generative souls, the past ceases to be a depressing chamber of horrors; it becomes a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach, carve and sing. The historian will not mourn because he can see no meaning in human existence except that which man puts into it; let it be our pride that we ourselves may put meaning into our lives, and sometimes a significance that transcends death. If a man is fortunate he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children. And to his final breath he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our lasting life."

I admire the perspective expressed in the Preface to *The Lessons of History*: The Durant's aim in creating this marvelous big picture assessment of the lessons they learned in their long study of history was "not originality but inclusiveness," so they repeated "many ideas that we, or others before us, have already expressed." I, Tiffany Twain, have also borrowed heavily from many sources, and right here now acknowledge my debt and appreciation to them all.

Shall we learn from history, or are the Durants correct in speculating that "the immense past may be only the weary rehearsal of the mistakes that the future is destined to make on a larger stage and scale?" In the Trump era, this question looms ever larger.

A Bottom Line Assessment

Money is power, and power is control. It seems glaringly obvious to me that the net effect of the power of money is the perpetuation of an establishment that controls our political system and prevents common sense reforms that would otherwise make our societies healthier, fairer, more just and more likely to be sustainable in the coming decades and centuries.

I strongly believe that we would achieve greater general prosperity if we were to implement policies that would make it easier for small businesses and innovative entrepreneurs and the middle class to succeed rather than pandering so exclusively to well-heeled established interests.

Since the time George W. Bush appointed conservative justices John Roberts and Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court, the high court has become more narrowly biased in favor of employers over workers, and of resource exploiters and polluters over environmental protections. At a time that the need for ecological sanity is growing more urgent every year, it is bizarre that power-abusing corporate entities and ideological intransigence and eco-stupidity are gaining such power. We would be eminently smart to do more to preserve the environment, instead of trying to rationalize its degradation.

Just a little more than 9 months after the misguided ruling in the *Citizens United* case, the bastard progeny of this ill-advised decision was delivered. A record sum of about \$4 billion was spent on the midterm elections in November 2010, an increase of more than 40% over the previous midterm elections of 2006. Additionally, the amount of this spending that came from undisclosed donors increased substantially. Spending like this has been off to the stratosphere since then.

Secrecy in the financing of elections is anathema in a democracy, for it conceals the source of opinion and spin, and it makes it easier for misinformation and distorted narratives to be disseminated that undermine larger perspectives of the greater good. The preponderance of this secret money was given to Republican and Tea Party candidates in the 2010 national elections. This allowed special interest groups to continue their success in shrewdly manipulating the public in ways that are contrary to fair-mindedness and good decision-making. Since then, Big Money corruption has gotten much much worse.

Wealthy people tend to be jealously protective of their privileges and prerogatives. They seem to feel completely entitled to their financial security and their high social status, as if the status quo of circumstances confirms they fully deserve all the privileges and rewards they get in our economic system. They believe in a sort of self-approving Social Darwinist self-righteousness. The effect of this state of affairs is to damn others who they regard as less accomplished and less deserving. The overwhelming majority of people who are less financially fortunate are envious of the rich, and they want to be equally lucky and secure. But they have much less power, and many of them feel undeserving of a fairer shake in our economic system. They may understand how unfairly rigged the system actually is, but they can do little about it. Their ability to succeed in endeavors is often severely limited by the unfair nature of the rules and structure of this system.

A small number of super-rich people are essentially making fools of the rest of the American people. We should all wake up and shout, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" This is not merely an issue of 'free speech' for corporations; it is an issue of decency, democracy, justice, healthy communities, sound finances, and the sanity of ecological wisdom.

The brilliant John Stuart Mill wrote in the early nineteenth century about the principles of "political economy". He made the startling and insightful observation that there is no "correct" distribution of wealth in a society. Every nation chooses its own tax structure and incentives and fairness plans and moral values, and thus chooses how extreme to allow the concentration of wealth to become, and how severe poverty will be, and whether or not to support the emergence and strengthening of a healthy middle class.

Fairer elections and representation are needed now. We should not allow the current system to be perpetuated as it is, because it gives dominating influence to 'fat cats'! Congress should correct this overriding challenge to the common good by enacting a proposed 'Fair Elections Now Act'. This legislation would have a salubrious effect on our elections and the health of our democratic republic by making election campaigns about the best ideas for improving our nation, and not just a skewed and misguided referendum on which candidates are the most successful in raising funds. This Act would use public financing of campaigns to create a fairer forum for the American people by limiting the amounts of corporate money and private contributions from rich people in our elections.

Congress should also enact laws requiring the disclosure of the *Dark Money* sources of funds received by candidates and initiatives in elections. Our representatives should reinforce these initiatives by passing a new

Constitutional Amendment that assures the vital importance of freedom of speech for individuals. This Amendment should make it clear that our democracy is designed to give a fair voice to all the people, not just to corporations whose coffers are vastly larger than those of individuals. This Amendment would help guarantee a more level playing field of representation for all Americans.

Serious reforms of ethics standards in Congress should also be put into effect. Meaningful restrictions should be established to limit the ability of lobbyists for powerful established interest groups to write the terms of legislation at federal and state levels of government.

We surely could achieve a better average quality of life for the American people by refusing to let rich people corrupt our economic and political systems in ways that give them an ever-bigger slice of the economic pie. The startling realization that the greater good of our society can best be achieved by enacting fairer tax policies makes one thing perfectly clear: We should refuse to allow wealthy people to continue to pay low tax rates on the highest levels of their incomes. To maximize the happiness of the vast majority of Americans, new policies should be instituted that will make sure that income and opportunities are shared more broadly. It is high time we begin curtailing the power of the super-rich to rig our national policies in ways that concentrate wealth and privilege more narrowly in the hands of the few. Campaign finance reform and a legislative overturning of the wrong-headed *Citizens United* ruling is a requisite first step. And throwing corrupt Trump Republicans out of office!

Our American Founders' Point of View

One need not be a Constitutional scholar or an astute historian to know that our Founders despised tyranny and abuses of power. They had risked their lives to gain independence from the despotism of British authorities and taxation without representation, so they established a form of government with broad checks and balances and other mechanisms built into it to prevent abuses of power. Any contention that it was our Founding Fathers' intention to guarantee free speech to powerful organizations and rich people at the expense of free speech rights and fair representation for the majority of people is preposterous.

While Americans proudly think we live in a democratic republic, we delude ourselves in this belief. Our political system is much more accurately understood as a plutocracy and a corporatocracy, i.e. a system of rule predominantly by wealthy people and giant corporations. As a result, our national goals are narrowed down to be nearly synonymous with the self-serving priorities of rich people and CEOs and big corporations, and NOT with the common good.

A New Yorker named David DeGraw has written essays collectively titled *The Economic Elite vs. The People of the United States of America*. He makes compelling observations in these essays about the terrible physical and psychological toll caused by mass unemployment and high costs of healthcare and the increasing numbers of people who are bankrupt or homeless or locked up in prisons. He asserts that a small economic elite of wealthy people in the U.S. is managing "to normalize the unthinkable" by concealing the true nature of our economic and political systems, and by deceiving people into thinking that the corrupt establishment is acceptable. But for too many millions of Americans, our society is unraveling, and the current exceedingly unfair economic system is becoming increasingly unacceptable.

Reactionary conservatives and simplistic folks in the Tea Party and the Freedom Caucus, on the other hand, believe that we need to turn back the clock on socially progressive initiatives and reduce the size of government, as if this would somehow be a panacea to make our nation more prosperous and people more free. I worked for a medium-sized corporation that was forced to lay off 10% of its workforce several times over the years, so I have no doubt that most government agencies could be downsized by 10% without reducing the effectiveness of their most important purposes. But accomplishing this would be difficult, and it would involve significant hardships. It would also make overall joblessness worse. The pitfalls of reducing the size of the State Department and the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies is being made starkly clear by the cynical ways the Trump administration is eviscerating crucial responsibilities in favor of amoral corporate goals.

The success of conservative politicians in the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections served to make partisan conflict even more pronounced, and resulted in vicious roadblocks to progressive change. The dominance of the government

by "conservatives" from January 2017 until the midterms in 2018 led to many detrimental outcomes, and the need is growing urgent for all interests to seek solutions to big challenges that are truly comprehensive, and to make fairer compromises to achieve the greater good for society as a whole from a long-term perspective.

Further proof of the fact that it is wrong-headed folly to allow unlimited amounts of money to dominate our politics is found in the fact that the degree of inequality in the United States has increased dramatically in the past three decades. This outcome has been facilitated by two primary initiatives: First, trillions of dollars in tax cuts have been given to rich people, an enormous windfall that began with Ronald Reagan's rash slashing of marginal tax rates on the highest incomes from 70% in 1980 to 28% between 1982 and 1988.

The second initiative that has contributed to dramatic increases in inequality was a startling reduction in taxes paid by businesses. Corporations were paying 60% less than the share of federal revenues they paid in 1960, according to the Congressional Budget Office some years ago, before the huge cut in corporate taxes enacted by Republicans in December 2017. Sixty percent less! Large businesses have managed to achieve this goal by contributing huge amounts of money to politicians to secure special favors, and by financing phalanxes of lobbyists who help ensure that numerous special benefits are given to the management and shareholders of corporate entities. These perks include direct subsidies, tax loopholes, tax cuts, and accelerated depreciation write-offs. Corporations also exploit legal tax evasion techniques and offshore tax shelters to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. Additional provisions are granted to corporations when sensible common good regulations are eviscerated and our representatives allow many costs of business activities to be foisted upon society as a whole.

These provisions allow businesses to externalize a wide range of costs onto society, including costs related to pollution mitigation, toxic waste clean up, resource depletion, periodic bailouts, medical care for their workers and others who are impacted by externalized costs, and natural disasters caused by global warming and related extreme weather events and climate disruptions.

Remember, corporations are narrowly focused because they exist for only two specific legal purposes: to limit the liability of management and shareholders for damages or harm that may be caused by corporate activities, and to maximize profits for owners and investors. To argue that free speech for individuals should be in effect subordinated to paid speech by giant corporations is not merely naïve or disingenuous, it is dishonest and practically traitorous to democratic fairness. Our political system subordinates all public policy priorities and decision-making to the narrow goals of capitalists and investors, so it is not adequately accountable. This is a big reason why our American political system is so dysfunctional, and why it must be reformed.

Our collective shortsighted reluctance to invest in the vital infrastructure of our nation will lead to "a steady erosion of the social and economic foundations for American prosperity in the long run". This declaration was made by a bipartisan panel of experts who met at the University of Virginia in September 2010. For one thing, public support of public education has been reduced in recent years, despite the fact that education is the underpinning of economic prosperity. Also, our public road and transportation system is "rapidly decaying and woefully underfunded", and yet the federal gas tax has remained unchanged at 18 cents per gallon since 1993, despite inflation that has significantly eroded the purchasing power of this revenue. This tax should be increased to finance the maintenance of our infrastructure for the future, and to begin to correct resource misallocations created by artificially cheap fossil fuels.

Partially as a result of giving the preponderance of benefits of our economy to rich people, the number of Americans living below the poverty level has reached the highest level since the government began tracking this statistic in 1959. Tellingly, the bottom 90% of American workers saw only a negligible increase in their average income during the 30 years from 1980 to 2010, in dramatic and condemnable decline from the 75% increase they had received during the 30 years from 1950 to 1980.

The Perspective of Thomas Paine, Plus Even Larger Ways of Understanding

Not long after the terrible terrorist attacks of 9/11, the honorable and honest journalist Bill Moyers observed the manipulative forces at play in the aftermath of the tragedy, and took note of companies and persons trying to capitalize on the tragedy, and noted succinctly:

"The soul of democracy -- the essence of the word itself -- is government of, by, and for the people. At the core of politics, the soul of democracy has been dying, drowning in a rising tide of big money contributed by a narrow and unrepresentative elite that has betrayed the faith of citizens in self-government."

Right on, Bill Moyers! Back in 1776, when the patriotic pamphleteer Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, it had a revolutionary effect on our nation's future. Paine saw society and civilization clearly, and he used the understandings gained from experience and reason as his guide in advocating a fair and representative system of government. He noted that, in earlier times, simple democracies consisted of people who governed themselves directly without the need for intermediaries. As the population grew, it became necessary to design a system of representation that modified simple democracy into governance capable of "embracing and confederating all the various interests" that compete for advantages and privileges.

Today, the need to respect and integrate all interests is greater than ever before. In fact, it is time that we see an even bigger picture. We must begin to give the interests of young people and those in future generations much greater consideration in all public policy decision-making. Our current economic and political systems give our children and grandchildren very short shrift. We practically ignore their best interests in the intense competition of actively involved people and entities trying to gain short-term advantages.

This is why we should adopt a Bill of Rights for Future Generations. This would responsibly create fairer and more farsighted public policies by providing an overarching context for our national priorities and the decisions we collectively make concerning such things as resource exploitation, habitat and environmental protections, waste disposal, social justice, job creation, deficit spending, the national debt, and peaceful coexistence.

The health of natural ecosystems and the vitality of the services they provide are public goods that our leaders should safeguard by preventing private entities from damaging them and depleting them at irresponsible rates. Nothing could be more sensible than the "polluter pays principle", and yet polluters successfully circumvent such policies. They do this so they can avoid paying the costs of pollution prevention and clean up, and to maximize shareholder profits.

All competitors should feel free to make as large a profit as they can, but only in the larger context that they are required to compete fairly, and to support sensible regulations to prevent cost externalizing schemes. They should come together and agree to support the imposition of Cost Externality Inclusion Carbon Fees that will help properly reflect the ecological and natural disaster costs of destabilizing the climate. We should collectively ensure that businesses make their profits in honest ways rather than by externalizing costs upon society. When we allow some production costs to be foisted onto the proverbial commons, the true costs of goods and services are distorted. This results in misguided and irrational allocations of resources. The net effect is to influence consumer choices in ways that are socially undesirable.

"What is the point of politics — of life, even — if not to leave a positive legacy for future generations? Not every issue so clearly implicates such big questions, in part because not every issue offers such a clear distinction between right and wrong, responsible and irresponsible, reality and reality denial. But climate change, the greatest self-imposed long-term threat facing humanity, offers that clarity. Today's youths will curse their forebears for failing to accept the truth." These sensible words were written by Stephen Stromberg in September 2019 in his opinion article, *Why baby boomers' grandchildren will hate them*.

Young Americans will face the challenge, because their parents and grandparents did not. They will do so with little time and a cash-strapped federal Treasury that the baby boomers fleeced to pay for tax cuts and retirement benefits. The Post poll found that about a quarter of today's teens had engaged in some form of climate activism. Others have not done much, but they will likely demand more as the problem gets worse and their political power grows. Generational change will bring policy change.

A detailed agenda for corporate change was published in 2019 by the Aspen Institute's Economic Strategy Group, which includes 60 prominent business leaders and economists and policymakers. The group's report described "rising frustration with American politics, a populist backlash [and] social fragmentation." Today's corporate reformers share the same concern about saving a broken capitalist system as did President Franklin D. Roosevelt in

the New Deal era and President Theodore Roosevelt in the Progressive era.

One member, the hedge-fund billionaire Ray Dalio, penned a manifesto published in April 2019 titled *Why and How Capitalism Needs to be Reformed*. In it, he made the historical analogy: "We are now seeing conflicts between populists of the left and populists of the right increasing around the world in much the same way as they did in the 1930s when the income and wealth gaps were comparably large."

With each passing month, more business executives have been joining this unlikely crusade to save capitalism from itself. "Evolve or die," wrote Ray Dalio.

The worst legacy being left by Trump Republicans will be the outcomes associated with their extraordinarily irresponsible extreme short-termism. They are abandoning many of their long-held principles out of political expediency and naked partisanship and pathological cowardice, as starkly revealed by their groveling failure to stand up to malfeasance and harms being foisted onto the public by giant corporations and big banks and Wall Street elites.

Materialistic Consumerism

It is likely that our heirs in future generations will regard our aggregate actions as so infamously irresponsible and shortsighted that they will seriously rue our mindlessness. I'm thinking about our collective behaviors such as extremely wasteful usages of resources, pollution of the environment, damages to habitats and ecosystems, and profligacy in incurring debt obligations. In historical retrospect, our descendants may come to see the negative aspects of the Industrial Era as having been reprehensibly obtuse and treacherous to their well-being. The time has come for us today to own up to the socially, biologically and ecologically detrimental nature of our growing hordes of human numbers, and to take bold remedial steps.

Economist Paul Krugman talks about a cascade of consumerism that begins with the conspicuous consumption by rich people and then cascades down to people who are less able to afford material goods, but who willingly go into debt to afford more of them so they can keep up with the Joneses.

Wes 'Scoop' Nisker expressed the opinion that, more than we need an economic stimulus, we may figuratively need a sedative. Ha! He points out that whenever someone proposes voluntary simplicity, dang it if *not enough people volunteer for it*. What we actually need may be much more effective incentives for people to choose simplicity! Being beings that love freedom and choice, one of my pet theories is that the sanest and fairest plan would be to establish smarter incentives and disincentives that will powerfully motivate people to conserve resources and limit wasteful consumption.

The word sanity is derived from the Latin root *sanus*, which means "healthy". Sanity can be gauged as healthy in human life to the extent that an individual's reasoning and judgment are sound. We are, unfortunately, collectively acting in many ways that are unsound and thus rather *insane*. This is true because our aggregate actions threaten our own individual and aggregate well-being, and even our species' survival. When we realize this truth, it should motivate us to seek new pathways that would be more likely to create an increasingly sustainable and harmonious existence. This would be how we can live in ways that are more probable to be auspicious for our children, and theirs, and all of our heirs.

Just because millions of people share the same vices doesn't make these vices virtues. It is a form of insanity to keep doing the same thing over and over again and to expect different results. The worship of money and material possessions in "the overdeveloped world" can be seen as an unmistakable mistake. When people crow about loving to "Shop until you drop", we should realize that the cultural consumerism underlying this odd addiction is insidiously unhealthy. The sanest course of action would be for us to strive with far-reaching commitment to create a healthier commonwealth.

"If you can't take the craziness anymore, there's only one thing to do. Commit yourself to a sane asylum."

--- Swami Beyondananda

Materialistic consumerism has created a spiritual vacuum that conservative religious groups like the "Moral Majority" and the Christian Coalition of America blame erroneously on liberalism and secular humanism. Humanism,

however, is a noble philosophy that has its central faith in reason, and in a continuously-adapting search for truth by means of philosophic exploration, critical thinking, open-minded reasoning and a good synthesis of scientific understandings, intuitive insights, real honest awareness and spiritual enlightenment. The philosophy of humanism is further explored in *Happy Harbingers in Good Ideas for a Better Future*.

"Man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."

--- Oliver Wendell Holmes

A Digression on Being Right

The political divide on the Supreme Court reflects deep ideological differences in beliefs between the worldviews of conservatives and liberals. The narrow conservative majority on the high court advocates a 'strict constructionist' view of our great American Constitution that unfortunately interprets this brilliant founding document in ways that value corporations over people. Seeing how clearly our Founders strived to prevent the federal government from being able to abuse power, it is preposterous to suppose they would be in favor of the views of conservatives that corporations deserve to be treated as persons, and thus allowed excessive power,

Joel Bakan's book *The Corporation - The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* cogently portrays the concept that, if giant corporations really were persons, the type of person they most likely resemble would be a sociopath. Corporations often act in ways that are manipulative, socially irresponsible, unempathetic, and practically incapable of guilt, remorse, moral rectitude or genuine responsibility for the greater good.

Joel Bakan wrote that big corporations are basically designed to externalize costs onto the public. He declared that corporations are "deliberately programmed, indeed legally compelled, to externalize costs without regard for the harm it may cause to people and communities and the natural environment. Every cost it can unload onto someone else is a benefit to itself, a direct route to profit." The fascinating film, *The Corporation*, is based on the book and is well worth watching. It is available on Netflix.

Think about Big Tobacco. This industry pushes tobacco products that are addictive because they naturally contain nicotine, a highly addictive drug, and there is a good probability that tobacco companies also add nicotine to their products to hook users. Nicotine addiction involves drug-reinforced behaviors, compulsive use and often a relapse following abstinence.

Do tobacco companies actually add nicotine to cigarettes? "We do not know." There is, scarcely believably, not any current public list of tobacco additives. "But what we do know is that increasing the amount of nicotine in cigarettes is in the best interest of Big Tobacco corporations to make bigger profits. Big Tobacco wants you to treat signs of nicotine withdrawal with more nicotine! And we also know that tobacco companies used to add nicotine to tobacco in the past." Smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer and other afflictions that kill tens of thousands of Americans every year, so this corporate propensity is not only very costly, but deadly.

Big Alcohol industries also cause deadly addictions, these to alcohol, which result in huge healthcare costs every year in the USA, and kill tens of thousands of people. This is a stunning contrast to the side-effect costs of legalized marijuana, which cause vastly lower healthcare costs, and wrongly suffers from the harsh war on drugs that unfairly incarcerates millions of Americans.

Think also about Big Tech, in the context of behavioral addictions. A man named Nir Eyal wrote a book on how to hook people on tech, titled *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*. He laid out how to manipulatively take advantage of user psychology, and the tricks to use to "subtly encourage customer behavior" and "bring users back again and again". He actually went around to various tech companies giving talks about "the Hook Model, his four step plan to grab and keep people with enticements like variable rewards, or pleasures that come at unpredictable intervals."

Big Tech has incurred the wrath of people on the left and the right for a variety of grievances. Companies like Facebook, Amazon and Google are too big, powerful and monopolistic, and tend to threaten privacy, degrade the public discourse, disadvantage small businesses and undermine democracy. And these companies hire lots of highly paid lawyers and accountants to succeed at evading taxes, in addition to hooking us on addictive services that often have no redeeming value.

Researchers have found that the number of countries with political disinformation campaigns more than doubled in the last two years, with evidence of at least one political party or government entity in each of 70 countries engaging in social media manipulation. Facebook is the number one social network for disinformation, according to a report. Organized propaganda campaigns were found on the platform in 56 countries."

Facebook's motto is "Move Fast and Break Things". Its founder Mark Zuckerberg likes to say that Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together, but he is failing to constrain people like Donald Trump who use the platform to propagate divisive issues and spread disinformation and false narratives and conspiracy theories.

The Trump campaign is spending big bucks on online ads that contain distorted and often-false information right now, a year before the 2020 elections, and Facebook executives appear incapable or unwilling to do anything about this distorting influence in our democratic republic and the way we choose leaders.

Just two weeks after a surprise White House meeting between Donald Trump and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg -- and days after leaked audio surfaced of Zuckerberg attacking Elizabeth Warren -- Facebook is acting nefariously. Independent investigative journalist Judd Legum reported that, "Until last week, Facebook's ad policies prohibited 'false or misleading content.' Facebook quietly changed its policies last week and eliminated that language."

Additionally, the "happy face" aspect of sharing on the Internet and social media sites like Facebook and Instagram can have malaise-inducing tendencies that can significantly corrode personal relationships and make enthusiasm about enjoyed experiences seem like braggadocio, engendering counterproductive, resentful or cynically depressive reactions.

Another grave criticism of amoral corporate profiteering is found in the "Nag Factor". The Nag Factor is another aspect of gross commercialization that exploits the tendency of children, who are bombarded with marketers' messages, to unrelentingly request advertised items from their parents, driving consumption of unhealthy fast foods and toys and electronic games and many useless products. This is a coldly calculating manipulation of children for marketing purposes in which advertisers shrewdly use a "Nag Factor" to exploit the credulity of children and their susceptibility to subliminal persuasion. One of the most harmful outcomes of marketing to young children is a resulting excessive indulgence in unhealthy junk foods like fat-laden hamburgers, salty foods, and sugary cereals, candy and carbonated soft drinks. Fast-food chains spend huge sums of money to promote toys that children will nag their parents to get. Promotions like this contribute to our nation's epidemic of childhood obesity and diabetes and other health problems.

We surely should not give greater power to such entities. They are, after all, organized to satisfy overly narrow purposes that are generally in conflict with the greater good. This myopic focus harms the commons and undermines our democracy.

Another shortcoming of our democratic process is that politicians are all too often dishonest in their efforts try to convince voters that they will do the right thing for the people, if elected. Not only do they generally break these promises once they get in office, but they also often do not actually know what the right thing is. Politicians not only generally pander to narrowly self-interested people over the greater good, but they can be ideologically rigid and cling tenaciously to the opinions of cherry-picked "experts" whose biases make them suspect.

Think about the revelations made by a psychologist named Philip Tetlock, who analyzed predictions made over a span of 25 years by economists, journalists, foreign policy specialists and intelligence analysts. He astonishingly found out that self-professed experts are *wrong more than 50% of the time!* The main reasons for inaccurate predictions were overconfidence and the phenomenon known as "confirmation bias". Experts tend to ignore contrary evidence, and they are deluded by hubris and ideological dogmatism into believing that they know what the outcome of trends and policy actions will be. They are thus "prisoners of their own preconceptions". Rigid conservatives like the former Governor Sam Brownback in Kansas should have heeded these words!

Philip Tetlock ominously concluded: "Our political discourse is driven in large part by people whose opinions are less accurate than a coin toss." That makes for bad planning!

"Prophecy is a good line of business, but it is full of risks."

--- Mark Twain

Another Glaring Example of Corporate Social Misbehavior

Greater-good goals are naturally broader and more long-term oriented than the short-term-oriented goals of giant corporations. The private sector is highly interested in maximizing profits, and an easy way to do this is by using up natural resources at the fastest possible rate while at the same time foisting upon the public the costs of resource depletion, health-impairing pollution, and ecosystem harms associated with their activities. Taxpayers and future generations are thus forced to pay for benefits that CEOs, corporate shareholders and investors gain at the public's expense.

An overwhelming majority of climate scientists agree that if humanity continues to spew tens of billions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere every year, the inevitable result will be rapidly growing costs related to health adversities and natural disasters caused by the disruptive effect of these emissions on the global climate. These disruptions will be manifested in more intense storms and weather extremes that will have high costs due to flooding, hurricane damages, heat waves, cold snaps, droughts, crop losses, more intense wildfires, ecosystem disruptions, coral bleaching due to warmer seas and ocean acidification, coastal inundations caused by rising sea levels and storm surges, and diminishing biodiversity caused by habitat degradation.

The Supreme Court decided in 2007 that the Environmental Protection Agency has the authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Since Congress and the White House have been largely dominated in recent decades by the influence of Big Oil and Big Coal and other vested corporate interest groups, a completely inadequate number of sensible national plans have been made to deal with this growing, dangerous, unjust, and irresponsible problem of excessive emissions and correlated climate disruptions. In this unnecessary void, the state of California passed a Global Warming Solutions Act in 2006, known as AB32, to address the problem at the state level by limiting emissions.

This California law was one of the first steps toward a necessary transition to an environmentally safer energy regime that uses cleaner fuels and more sustainable alternatives to power our civilizations. Two of the biggest polluters in California aggressively fought to have this bill derailed by supporting Proposition 23 on the November 2010 ballot. Ironically, both of them were Texas-based oil conglomerates, Tesoro and Valero. BP might have joined them, but I reckon that it would just have been too negative a public relations move after their environmentally calamitous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April and May 2010. These companies, along with the Koch brothers, spent money lavishly to try to convince voters to postpone global warming mitigation legislation.

"This is a corruption of the democratic process," said Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger at the time. "Today, Valero and Tesoro are in a conspiracy. Not in a criminal conspiracy, but a cynical one about self-serving greed. Does anyone think in their black oil company hearts that they want to create jobs?"

California voters wisely rejected this corporate initiative. One journalist likened the Proposition 23 effort to a conspiracy hatched among oil companies in the 1920s to get rid of light rail systems. Remember that *Roger Rabbit* story? After buying up easements for light rail systems in 45 cities, corporations then systematically dismantled these vital public transportation systems. The negative effects of this corporate 'conspiracy' against urban public transportation are now becoming starkly clear as traffic in many locales is becoming markedly opprobrious.

A Speculation about Common Sense Fairness

I chuckle at a friend's observation that we could solve the problems of alcoholism and drug abuse by a simple initiative: Dramatically improve the reality of the societies in which we live!

It occurs to me that maybe working people do not have to be chewed up and spit out by corporate organizations; maybe a social security safety net should be a human right, and the cost of it should be fairly included in the price of every good and service.

Chew up workers and spit them out? That phraseology sounds pretty harsh, Tiffany. Then again, there are countless stories to support this characterization of how businesses treat their employees harshly. That, in fact,

is why a social safety net was created under the New Deal during the Depression of the 1930s. "Thanks for your contributions, but you're fired!"

Here is a story that involves Walmart, the giant American retailer. There was a horrible fire at a factory in Bangladesh in November 2012 in which 112 workers were killed and 1,800 were injured. The survivors and the families of the victims suffered terrible hardships, so some of the European retailers who had goods produced in that factory worked to increase the size of a compensation fund they established to help these workers out. Not a single American retailer agreed to contribute anything to this fund, despite the fact that more than half of the goods produced in the factory were reportedly made for Walmart. One might think that the Walmart family, the richest family in the world with four of the wealthiest Americans ranked in Forbes Top 10, would be willing to provide a little desperately needed aid to the victims of that fire. Rob Walton, Christy Walton, Alice Walton, and Jim Walton: the optics sure looked very bad for this callous indifference!

Walmart is the biggest private employer in the world, and the largest retailer. It employs over two million people. Its business model has generally been one of almost ruthless and anti-social behavior. Not only does it make extensive use of cheap labor abroad, but it compensates its employees so poorly that many of them need social assistance to make ends meet. Why, one Walmart in Ohio once launched a drive to get its employees to contribute to a food drive to help out other needy Walmart employees who struggle so hard that they can't even afford a good Thanksgiving dinner! A cynical, "Thank you, Walton billionaires!"

A million other stories could be told about how workers within the U.S. have been treated shoddily during their employment and after big corporations are through with their services!

Sex! And Money!!

Federal and state governments are like rich ladies of easy virtue who have been plied with alcohol, gullible and easy to exploit, and rather ditzy and oddly loose with their purse strings. Corporations are like unscrupulous and highly-sexed men who are eager to take advantage of such alluring ladies. Money is like Viagra to these old goats, these clever proxies for wealthy people. The lure of money and the compulsion to control others seems to stimulate corporations and the CEOs who run them to fervently court governments for special favors and privileges. Economists use a decidedly unsexy term for these morally suspect activities: "rent-seeking". Wikipedia provides good illumination of the pathetic parameters of activities described by this term.

Since the overarching goal of corporations is to make profits without having to be responsible or liable, it would be most sensible to require all businesses to compete fairly by striving to develop superior products or by providing higher quality services than their competitors. It is, however, often much easier for big businesses to take advantage of the generosity and profligacy of governments, and of their well-known poor ability to fairly control their finances. It is thus no surprise that plying the political representatives of the people with money and intoxicating favors is a rapid growth industry. These favors include inducements like campaign contributions, extravagant wining and dining, inclusion in good-old-boy clubs, lobbyist pressures, self-affirming ideological rationalizations, and general pandering to the peccadilloes and predilections of politicians and their hunger for power. In a myriad of instances, these things are a serious betrayal of the public trust.

The majority of people, meanwhile, are forced to figuratively keep their noses to the grindstone. They are practically powerless to prevent the tax man from taking a hefty cut of their hard-earned dollars to facilitate this game. People are diverted from understanding the true nature of this scam, and of the tax evasion schemes of rich people who would have the least difficulty in being able to afford to pay a greater share of the tax burden than the system currently requires.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once stated a simple fact: "Taxes are what we pay for a civilized society." High income earners should be required to pay a higher amount of taxes on the highest levels of their earnings to ensure the greater well-being of our civilization. A detailed and eminently fair proposal on how to restructure our tax system can be found in *One Dozen Big Initiatives to Positively Transform Our Societies*.

All the participants in this chess game of complex strategies seem to be willing to let the powers-that-be grease the economic wheels by hyper-stimulating consumerism. They zealously borrow enormous sums of money from all

taxpayers in every future year to gin up this unsustainable Ponzi-like scheme to a fever pitch of irresponsible profiteering. And they mindlessly violate the fundamental Keynesian economic doctrine that says high levels of deficit spending should not be used to stimulate the economy during boom times. No one seems to be honest enough to proclaim that "the emperor has no clothes" by revealing the obvious fact that the real outcome of this laissez-faire debt-financed system is socially unacceptable. One outcome of our current system is an increasing concentration of wealth -- and of poverty. Another is a debt burden trend that is driving us toward national insolvency. These developments diminish the fair prospects of our descendants. Checkmate!

Theft and Other Idiocias

"Thou shalt not steal."

--- One of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:15)

Since 1980, more than \$21 trillion has effectively been stolen from our children and people in the future by cutting taxes while profligately increasing spending on wars, munitions, prisons, pork barrel projects, no-bid contracts, corporate subsidies, and a wide range of entitlements. Our political system is terribly dysfunctional when it is so EASY to cheat people in future generations to benefit the few today, and so HARD to increase taxes on the wealthiest people as part of broad measures to bring the federal budget more nearly into balance.

We have backed ourselves into a desperate corner where we seem to be incapable of making fair-minded and farsighted decisions. "Big Lies" have enabled this state of affairs, and Republican Senator Mitch McConnell promulgated another one of these deceptions when he declared it politically impossible to increase taxes on the wealthy because, as he diabolically put it, "we all know that including massive, job-killing tax hikes would be a poison pill."

Tax increases on incomes exceeding \$250,000 per year need not be "massive", and such increases would not "kill jobs" anywhere near as seriously as the 2008 financial crisis did. That economic crisis was caused by bubble economic policies, the deregulation of financial instruments and derivatives, and excessive risk-taking in the banking industry. The crisis was made worse by an adamant insistence on low taxes for those who benefit most from the status quo, and who could most easily afford to pay more of the costs of ensuring that our nation remains prosperous, strong, and fair.

Conservative politicians have allied themselves with wealthy people and the Religious Right to subvert honest democratic governance. They have helped facilitate a system of institutionalized bribery, corporate malfeasance, and unethical Congressional pandering to lobbyists. In the process, they have not only allowed wide-ranging corporate cost-externalizing practices but have also helped perpetuate discriminatory unfairness toward women, young people, and all people in future generations.

A new vision is needed for our nation. We cannot allow the current corrupt system to be perpetuated without substantial reform. Our political system is not only uncompromisingly dysfunctional, but also ecologically insane as well. This system is undermining the health of our home planet's ecosystems, thus reducing their carrying-capacity ability to support humankind, and millions of other species of life. This makes the system ever more starkly misguided.

We should collectively find a way to practice better stewardship of natural resources and all of "Creation". Damage to habitats and ecosystems and the wantonly wasteful depletion of resources should be discouraged through powerful incentives and disincentives.

This new vision should honorably champion a Bill of Rights for Future Generations to ensure that shortsighted political expediencies do not completely dominate our decision-making. We must, simply put, adjudicate deep conflicts of interests in public planning in ways that allow us to more nearly balance the federal budget and create sustainable economic growth in the long term. It must no longer be politically impossible to achieve fair-minded compromises that respect the prospects of people in future generations. Read the persuasive proposal for such a Bill of Rights in the Earth Manifesto, and SUPPORT the ideas therein!

Economist Jeffrey Sachs makes the compelling point in his insightful book *Common Wealth* that we need new economic policies and fairer political representation on our crowded planet. He provides numerous

recommendations that would, if sensibly implemented, make our societies safer. The Earth Manifesto likewise contains great ideas for how we could achieve a sensible role reversal from the business-as-usual dominance of our politics by entrenched interests intent on perpetuating the status quo.

More About the Undesirable Influence of Big Money in our Politics

Think some more about lavish spending by corporations and wealthy people on our elections. Surely this form of institutional bribery is particularly contrary to the common good when it is primarily responsible for obstructing sensible pay-as-you-go rules, and for preventing rules from being enacted and enforced that require polluters to pay for the prevention or mitigation of the pollution they cause. Entrenched interest groups generally oppose such greater good goals because they are so focused on getting ever-more subsidies, perks, profits and lower taxes for themselves at the expense of the public good.

Vested interests are largely responsible for the extreme fiscal irresponsibility of the first 18 years of the twenty-first century. It is stunning that the U.S. began this century with a national budget surplus in the years 2000 and 2001, and then managed to turn this surplus into the largest deficits in world history. This was accomplished by spending money like a drunken sailor while giving trillions of dollars in tax cuts to rich people and large corporations. Simultaneously, the government rashly subjected the financial system to less regulation, less oversight and less accountability, and big businesses were given many new tax breaks and subsidies. More government spending, coupled with lower tax revenues, is an obvious recipe for fiscal shortfalls.

Corporate money effectively buys politicians and helps businesses dictate the terms of most laws that affect them. The influence of Big Money in our political system can be seen in almost every law passed by Congress. Wall Street, Big Oil, defense industries, large drug companies, health insurance companies, industrial agribusinesses and almost every other arena of corporate activity can be seen to excessively dominate our decision-making.

The example of the Medicare Prescription Drug Act of 2003 is instructive. The provisions of this legislation were clearly devised to provide huge benefits to the drug industry by denying the federal government the power to negotiate lower drug prices. This provision ensured that drug company profits would be big, and would grow bigger, at the direct expense of taxpayers. This complicated Medicare drug entitlement plan cost more than \$1 trillion in the first 10 years since it was enacted.

Likewise, the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005 is another piece of legislation that was a gift to corporations. In this instance, it was a form of welfare given to credit card companies and student loan companies. This law created a hardship for people who cannot afford usurious interest rates for credit card debt and high over-limit fees and late fees. The majority of people who are affected by this bankruptcy law are people who have fallen on hard times due to costs related to catastrophic illness, divorce, loss of a job, or the inability to get a job.

To allow the government to side with such changes in laws in favor of corporations is unconscionable when the changes take advantage of people who are in existentially difficult circumstances. Prisons for debtors were eliminated long ago, but today we allow banks too much latitude to exploit people who have suffered serious adversities in their lives.

One way to start changing this state of affairs would be to limit the amount of corporate money in political campaigns. Our representatives should be made more responsive to the American people, not just to the special interest groups that have the most money. We should seek improved accountability of big corporations, and demand more transparency of campaign contributors and lobbyist financiers and Wall Street bankers and CEOs. Fairer and more effective management of the government is needed. In 2016, I wrote: "To cede power to economic fundamentalists and Tea Party zealots would let them move us backwards at a time we should be moving smartly forward. Power to the people!"

Illusions and Delusions in our Two-Party Political System

Some people convincingly say that the American political system was designed to prevent effective action by the government, instead of facilitating it. The structure of the U.S. Senate distorts the notion of democratic fairness by giving equal representation to states with large numbers of people and states with small populations. Thus the

state of Alaska, with its 700,000 citizens, has two U.S. Senators, just the same as the state of California, which has almost 40 million people. The dysfunctional nature of Congress seems to be similarly bad in the House of Representatives, where the gerrymandering of Congressional districts has given excessive power to increasingly extreme and uncompromising conservatives. These facts are one reason it is so difficult to get smart things done in our nation today. In this respect, our form of governance may be somewhat accurately characterized as an "idiocracy"! Ha! Check out the 2006 comedic film *Idiocracy* for some pathetically funny entertainment!

The old observation of P.J. O'Rourke's -- that "The Republicans are the party that says that government doesn't work, and then gets elected and proves it" -- makes me reflect on the fact that the Democratic Party does not seem to do all that much better, because it is also largely controlled by powerful special interests. The divisive conflict between the two parties in the struggle for power masks the reality that both parties pander to the influence of moneyed interests in our politics rather than honestly striving to help ensure the greater good.

This makes our political system, in a real sense, a kind of one-party duopoly system. The dominant ideology of those who control this system holds that the prerogatives given to those with power and privilege are properly placed and appropriate. This ideology effectively endorses the privatization of profits and the socialization of costs and risks, and it implicitly rejects the great principle in a democracy that asserts government should be "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

The U.S. government is not adequately dealing with many of the really big problems we face. The primary reason our political system is dysfunctional is because of the outsized influence of wealthy people, giant banks, Big Oil companies, Big Pharma, large insurance companies, the National Rifle Association and the military-industrial complex. This is why the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program in 2008 was principally focused on helping Wall Street, not Main Street.

The illusion of a two-party system is fostered by the sound and fury of rancorous conflict between Democrats and Republicans over hot-button social issues and a "blame game" regarding issues that are more substantive. Since politicians are forced to pander to various vested interests to get money to stay in power, all legislative decisions tend to be oriented around benefitting CEOs, investors and rich people, not average Americans or people in future generations. This is why we need serious campaign finance reform and real Congressional ethics reform and stronger restrictions on the influence of corporate lobbyists.

There is a blatant revolving door between corporate management and government regulatory agencies and the lobbying industry. This should be restricted, and we should elect leaders who are more socially and environmentally responsible.

"The path to the future should be small-donor democracy, not corporate democracy," said Bob Edgar, the president of the fine organization Common Cause until his untimely death in 2014. Instead of moving in this reasonable direction, the *Citizens United* ruling by the narrow conservative majority on the Supreme Court basically rejected common sense and institutionalized unfair representation of the people, giving overarching favoritism to the corrupting influence of corporations in our elections and governance.

It is the nature of our contemporary capitalist system to allow big businesses to nearly completely dominate decision-making. We should enact smart laws and regulations to prevent these entities from evading their obligations to their employees and to society. To do this, the influence of Big Money in our politics should be reduced rather than allowed to increase. If this is not done, then workers and citizens will be forced to bear even more externalized costs, and people will become more dependent on the vagaries of the market, and more vulnerable to corporate shenanigans and power-abusing exploitation by demagogic leaders.

Hopes for a post-partisan world have been shattered upon the political reality that, for all the bluster about morality and ideological propriety, the intense competition between opposing politicians is not a competition for the best ideas, or the fairest outcomes, or the most sensible plans. No, not in the least! Instead, it is a ruthless fight for money, power, control, dominance, and perks and privileges. Republicans are proving that they are far less willing than Democrats to compromise, and their failure to work together with Democrats for the common good has helped prevent us from fairly solving the most important of our national problems.

A democracy relies on citizens being well-informed and independent in their thinking. Skepticism of vested interest propaganda is healthy. Democracies rely on people being able to have their voices heard by their representatives. The best government would be one in which a fair and optimum balance is established between the goals of strong individual liberties and adequate social responsibilities and a reasonable modicum of equality and justice. We should strive to ensure that we re-commit our society to Golden Rule ethics by overriding partisan biases and reducing stubborn support for anti-egalitarian policies and special privileges for elites.

Incarceration Nation: An Aside on the American Prison System

Wealthy people tend to jealously guard their prerogatives and privileges. Since they wield most of the power in our political system, our representatives generally defend the way things are, and many people without good opportunities are forced to seek social service help or join the military or commit crimes like robbing banks or stealing things.

Consider the astonishing fact that there are more than 2 million people in prison in the United States, up from just 500,000 people when Ronald Reagan became president. We now have more people incarcerated than any other nation in the world. The per capita statistics are stunning: for every 100,000 citizens, the U.S. has 700 people in prison, compared to 110 in China, 80 in France, and 45 in Saudi Arabia.

The Sentencing Project, a group that has been providing research and advocacy for prison reform for almost 30 years, confirms that the U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration of people in prisons or jails of any nation in the industrialized world. This extremely high rate of incarceration is unprecedented in our country's history. The number of people locked up grew 375% from 1980 to 2008 -- while the total population grew just 34%. This is a form of social repression, and a very costly one, and it has serious moral and social consequences."

Opening new prisons and outsourcing prison functions to private companies is, pathologically, a rapid growth business. Why is the U.S. prison industry experiencing such a rapid expansion? One reason for this trend is the glaring unfairness of our society and the stresses associated with it. Ruthlessly punitive efforts are being made to enforce this state of affairs. To reduce the growing costs of this trend, we need to reform our sentencing laws and correctional system -- and we sure should make more honorable efforts to reduce the motives for crime by creating greater social justice in our country. Increasingly inegalitarian social policies and harsher punishments are counterproductive. Greater fairness is needed to increase the overall health of the people, as measured by their average longevity. The U.S. ranks a pathetic thirty-eighth in the world in the average life span of its citizens.

Consider the "Three strikes and you're out" laws that have been passed in about half the States in the U.S. The Three Strikes law in California has been called "the worst criminal law in the country", because of the fact that a third offense need not be a violent crime or a serious felony, yet it resulted in an automatic life sentence. More than 8,000 inmates have been incarcerated for life in prison in California because of the Three Strikes law. The costs of three-strikes incarcerations exceed \$40,000 per inmate each year, and this cost will increase significantly as prisoners get older and need more medical care before they die.

The third felony for some of the criminals in California has been a minor crime that does not merit such harsh punishment. California can no longer afford the high costs of imprisoning such offenders for their entire lives. In some ways, this is a kind of unethical scam oriented toward profiteering that seems designed to benefit prison-builders, and to create jobs and perks for prison guard unions.

These gambits are supported by Strict Father ideologies and a "tough-on-crime Kool-Aid" that originated with politicians in the U.S. and was exported to countries worldwide. An eye-opening story about this whole subject is contained in the 2016 book *Incarceration Nations - A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World*, by Baz Dreisinger, a professor at City University of New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. She makes clear "the fact that many nations are now seeking answers to the social and fiscal disaster of mass incarceration; they no longer want to emulate the United States."

Peter Enns, in his 2017 book *INCARCERATION NATION: How the United States Became the Most Punitive Democracy in the World*, makes clear the political and social processes that led to the US becoming the world's leader in incarceration, and the influence of the media in manipulating public opinion.

Since this state of affairs is so wrong-headed, it cries out:

REFORM THE CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEM NOW!

A Call for Fairer Taxation

Numerous rationalizations are formulated to get policies enacted that make the rich richer at the expense of all other Americans and people in future generations. This is economically wrongheaded, socially disastrous, anti-democratic, and ecologically harmful. For these reasons, it is ethically wrong.

Billionaire businessman and investor Warren Buffet has repeatedly pointed out the folly of having a tax system in which people who make millions of dollars pay lower effective tax rates than their secretaries. Rich people pay lower overall rates largely due to low taxes on capital gains. Stubborn ideological arguments are endorsed by representatives of rich people to make taxes low on income earned from owning capital assets. But doesn't it seem outrageous to require people who work hard for their money to pay higher tax rates on their incomes than people who get money from inheritances or investments? Those who have inherited money or accumulated it due to the inequalitarian nature of our capitalist system should be required to pay rates on their incomes that are at least as high as working people!

Warren Buffet points out that large disparities of wealth hurt the economy by stifling opportunity and motivation. He testified before the Senate Finance Committee in 2007 in defense of the federal estate tax, the nation's only tax on inherited wealth. He invoked the historical roots of the estate tax, which was established in 1916 to put a brake on 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 progressive and meaningful estate tax is needed to curb the movement of a democracy toward plutocracy." He continued: "Tax-law changes have benefited this super-rich group, including me, in a huge way." It is time to revise these changes with a more steeply graduated tax system! These understandings make it even more shockingly absurd that our elected representatives in the House voted on April 16, 2015 to repeal estate taxes entirely.

Further Observations, Including a Wide-Eyed Disclaimer

What caused the Supreme Court to consider the *Citizens United* case in the first place? Senator John Kerry had lost his presidential bid in 2004 in part because of scurrilous personal attack ads by a right-wing group that called itself "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth". Having seen the effectiveness of the smear campaign by this group, and of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* criticisms of the war policies of George W. Bush's administration, a group calling itself Citizens United recognized the potentially powerful influence of films. So it set out to produce a ninety-minute attack video against Hillary Clinton during the 2008 primary campaign for the presidency. The video was called *Hillary: The Movie*. Its influence just before the primary elections was deemed by the Federal Election Commission to be a violation of campaign finance laws. A lawsuit ensued.

It took two years before the case made its way to the Supreme Court and a ruling was made. The five conservative Justices on the Court took this opportunity to make a sweeping decision that overturned a number of sensible campaign finance laws. This ruling opened the flood gates to an unlimited amount of hyper-negative and truth-misconstruing political speech. In the wake of this ruling, it is now important for us to collectively find ways to limit the influence that corporations and rich people have in our politics and on our public policies. Legislation known as Fair Elections Now should be enacted!

Soon after this Supreme Court decision, President Obama harshly criticized the ruling. He told the American people, "I can't think of anything more devastating to the public interest. The last thing we need to do is hand more influence to the lobbyists in Washington, or more power to the special interests to tip the outcome of elections."

Look. I've watched *Hillary, The Movie*, and it portrays some valid perspectives. To climb to the top in American politics, politicians must be ambitious and somewhat ruthless and adroit and at least a bit dishonest. This is why so many politicians of every party have seedy sides to their characters. Many recruit Machiavellian, manipulative,

shrewd, Karl Rove-like political operatives and associates who engage in sometimes underhanded activities. The qualities that allow success in politics seem to almost automatically exclude forthright honesty and principled dedication to the common good.

But our elections should be about choosing representatives who work for the greater good. The global challenges we collectively face today are more daunting now than almost any time ever before in history. This makes it urgent for us to engage in honest debate about vitally important issues. We should focus on these things, and choose good leaders, and avoid getting derailed by negative campaigning and smears of opponent's characters and political machine politicking.

Hillary, The Movie was basically one long propaganda piece that said: HILLARY IS A JERK. HILLARY IS A LIAR. HILLARY IS WRONG. A similar hit piece could be made about almost every politician, with more or less damning material for every one. Let's find a way to stick to the issues that are most important to the future!

Broader Considerations of the Role of Corporations and Government

The Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* case is far more complex than is construed herein. So are broader issues of fairness and social responsibility. Corporations have made many significant positive contributions in the world. They are forms of organization that have created millions of jobs and facilitated an amazing proliferation of products and services. They have helped employ and feed and clothe and shelter hundreds of millions of people. They have created an extraordinary distribution system, and they have helped revolutionize things like transportation, communications, medicine, electronics and social media.

Corporations are a part of a free market system that rewards hard work and well-made, affordable goods, and theoretically discourages shoddy and unreasonably priced goods. It also often valuably stimulates innovation, investment, specialization and productivity. It does these things when the system is functioning properly. However, the laissez-faire ideology that says markets always provide optimum outcomes turns a blind eye to the extensive failings of market capitalism.

These failings have become rudely apparent in the last decade. A dogma of deregulation helped create the inflation and subsequent collapse of speculative bubbles, along with accompanying economic turbulence, and this has had terrible outcomes for billions of people. Our system has been rigged through the use of distorted incentives, and extreme inequities have in effect been encouraged, and Ponzi-like frauds have been perpetrated, and large-scale environmental degradation has been facilitated.

Apologists for the status quo stick to their old story that a beneficent invisible hand guides all economic activity for the greater good, even though it is quite obvious that, in fact, hidden hands frequently manipulate people and rig the system to maximize their own narrow interests. Much more often than not, these vested interests strive to gain advantages at the expense of the majority of people. There is proof of this contention: the deep inequities in our societies become much more pronounced whenever regulations and controls over corporate accountability are reduced, and whenever less transparency is required.

Many trillions of dollars of government financing have been required to deal with "spillover effects" of irresponsible profiteering by banks and other special interest groups that led to the "Great Recession". This is a perverse aspect of the status quo. And yet a refrain swells in the background, amped up by agitation fomented by wealthy conservatives: Socialism, socialism, evil, evil, horror, hate, fear, embrace ignorance, drown the government in a bathtub! Cut taxes!!

Concerning Corruption and Intelligent Policy

Millions of Americans intensely dislike paying taxes. Untold numbers of people are upset by hardships associated with high unemployment, home foreclosures, difficulties in getting loans, absurdly escalating costs of health care and medical insurance, retirement insecurity, homelessness, military occupations of foreign countries, and the rapacious and polluting impacts of giant corporations on the environment. Conservatives and Tea Party followers and secret donors have managed to misdirect this anger toward government and public employees and progressives, but it would be more appropriate to direct it toward wealthy people and large corporations that are the most responsible for the current extremely inequalitarian state of affairs.

There is a considerable range of types of capitalist societies. In the U.S., many aspects of the economy are "socialized". Tax revenues and borrowed money are used to finance a powerful military presence around the world, and to pay for police and other law enforcement officers in cities and rural areas, and for firefighters, prisons, courts, public schools, libraries, government agencies, post office funding shortfalls, and investments in roads, bridges, water systems, disaster relief programs, unemployment benefits, social security programs, poverty alleviation programs and many other things.

In contrast, the socially successful economies of countries in Europe and Scandinavia provide fairer health care and retirement security than in the United States. Those economies are not markedly less successful than the U.S. in economic terms, but they are considerably less socially disastrous than our American form of capitalism.

Robert Heilbroner introduces an interesting idea in *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*. He asserts that executive compensation in the biggest corporations in the U.S. is twice as much as that of France and Germany, but the upward mobility of the American poor is only half that of those countries and only a third of that in Sweden. "The first comparison points to a culture of greed", he opines; "the second to one of social indifference. The combination hardly suggests the institutional adaptability that will be needed by any nation seeking to minimize the strains of the decades ahead, much less serve as a model for world leadership."

Reflections on Political Corruption

Transparency International, a global civil organization, publishes an annual "Corruption Perceptions Index" to shine a glaring light on the damaging effects of corruption in public sectors worldwide. Somalia, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, North Korea, Sudan, Guinea Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Afghanistan, and Libya were rated the most corrupt governments in the world in the 2018 Index. Denmark, New Zealand, Finland, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Netherlands and Canada were rated the least corrupt governments in the world. The United States was rated worse than 21 other nations. Our rating in 2010 had fallen slightly from 2009, possibly due to the Supreme Court's decision to allow more institutional bribery in our elections. Anyone in America who watches television is aware of the ugly and confusing barrage of political ads that pervaded the airwaves in the drumbeat that led up to the national midterm elections of 2010, and to Election Day in 2012, and to the 2014 midterms and to the presidential election of 2016. Our rating in the last year has fallen significantly because of the corruption of the Trump regime.

We should strive to make both governments and corporations more socially responsible by requiring greater transparency and accountability in their activities. Transparency International notes: "The message is clear: across the globe, transparency and accountability are critical to restoring trust and turning back the tide of corruption." The organization advocates stricter implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption, which is "the only global initiative that provides a framework for putting an end to corruption."

Honesty, integrity and greater fairness should be restored in our economic and political systems. What would our economy and society look like if we effectively outlawed the institutional bribery that results from allowing excessive influence to Big Money in our elections?

The Issue of Regulatory Capture

Another aspect of the corporate control of our politics is the phenomenon known as "regulatory capture". This is a form of systemic corruption in which powerful vested interests subvert the will of the people and the purposes of government regulatory agencies. Federal agencies were established to represent the people's interests, and yet many of these agencies have in effect been 'captured' by organizations they were created to regulate. For instance, big pharmaceutical companies routinely run circles around the Food and Drug Administration, sometimes getting unsafe drugs approved and allowing the use of dangerous food additives and agricultural chemicals. Similarly, the purposes of the Environmental Protection Agency are undermined by corporate interest groups in order to allow corporate profits to be unaffected by inconvenient "polluter-pay principles" or regulations that would prevent costs from being externalized onto society. Banks and Wall Street corporations evade regulation, supervision and accountability. And remember that the wily Bernie Madoff somehow managed to perpetrate the

biggest rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul Ponzi scheme fraud in history right under the noses of Securities and Exchange Commission regulators for many years.

Regulatory capture is made easier by a 'revolving door' in which regulatory officials come from corporations they are meant to regulate. Our representatives in Congress and officials of regulatory agencies often move on and become lobbyists who work to influence legislation designed to advance narrow corporate goals rather than the greater good.

There is also a broader problem than regulatory capture. Enormous multinational corporations sprawl beyond the control of any one government, and they have powerful influence over the entire global economy. These large companies often make profits by means that are unfair and irresponsible at the expense of the American people and of people in other countries, and of all humanity, and of almost every form of life on Earth.

Let Us Not Forget the Military-Industrial Complex

An overriding aspect of the domination of our politics by Big Money is found in the arena of war and peace. We should never forget the insightful words that Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke at the end of his presidency in 1961:

"In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."

What sensational foresight! National security and liberty are good. Unfairness and excessively heavy national indebtedness are not good. We are spending far too much money on our military, and on sending our troops abroad. We would not do this so much if we were required to actually pay for it today through higher taxes. By allowing these costs to be foisted onto people in the future, we are acting highly irresponsibly. We should begin to more tightly control military aggression and spending now!

The Republicans Get "A Second Chance"

Voters chose to give Republicans "a second chance" in the 2010 national elections after their terrible record during George W. Bush's administration and their subsequent smackdown in the 2008 national elections. Recall that Republicans controlled Congress most of the time from 2001 to 2009, and they significantly increased government spending while slashing taxes on the rich. This created the biggest budget deficits and increases in the national debt in history until that time. They also figuratively drove the economy into a ditch by deregulating banks and encouraging speculative leveraging and acting to inflate the real estate bubble. They also ramped up spending on the defense establishment and involved the U.S. in long-lasting military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. They even created a costly new entitlement program for prescription drugs, and irresponsibly reduced protections of the environment to allow big corporations to make bigger profits at the public expense.

Voters in 2008 had been fed up with the results of these misguided Republican initiatives, so they demanded change and elected Barack Obama and gave control of Congress to Democrats. But the hopes of Americans had been dashed because the Recession that had been spawned under Republican policies resulted in millions of people being laid off and millions of homes being lost in foreclosure. The credit crisis that started this negative episode forced the federal government to bail out big banks and auto companies, and to desperately stimulate the economy with more corporate tax breaks and recovery spending and other costly measures.

Republicans acted as "the party of no" for 8 years during the tenure of President Obama. Media spin, financed by wealthy individuals, nonetheless convinced many voters that Republicans offer hope for actually addressing the daunting problems facing our nation and the world. Republican fear mongering about "socialism" also has been somewhat effective in scaring people, and this has shifted the balance of power too far to the right.

Don't believe all the scare-mongering BS about the evils and dangers of "socialism". The real risk is found in unbridled greed that drives extreme disparities in wealth, healthcare, fair dealings, experienced well-being and the overall security of the citizenry.

In *A Feminine Vision*, I refer to the great challenge we face because Americans of all stripes basically "want to eat their cake and have it too." We want a large basket of social goods, but we do not want to pay for it. We want police, firefighters, a strong military, protective Homeland Security, a fair system of justice, adequate prisons, and good public schools and libraries and roads and water systems and sewage treatment plants. We want some sort of socially affordable safety net for military veterans and old people and the homeless and the mentally ill and the disabled and the extremely poor. We also want clean air and good water quality and protected open spaces, public beaches, state parks, national parks, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas.

It makes sense to have these social goods financed by the populace as a whole. But no one seems to be willing to pay the taxes required to provide all of these things, particularly not rich people who are best able to afford to pay higher rates on the highest levels of earnings. Our representatives, as a result, do the expedient thing, even though it is highly unfair and shortsighted: they foist the costs onto taxpayers in the future by indulging in deficit spending.

The Republican majority in the House of Representatives from 2010 through 2018 adamantly obstructed reform efforts and undermined progress. This negative strategy has contributed to our collective failure to deal effectively with looming problems. And stubborn opposition by Republican politicians to tax increases and reforms of the tax code have made it impossible to balance the budget.

Specific Rich People who are Instrumental in Obstructing Common Good Reforms

Charles and David Koch (pronounced 'Coke') are among the most egregious examples of really rich people who are selfish, greedy and unempathetic in their staunch opposition to sensible reforms. These two billionaire brothers once ranked as the 4th and 5th richest people in America (until David Koch died in August 2019). They owned Koch Industries, the second largest privately held company in the U.S., which is based in Wichita, Kansas. It is a huge conglomerate of manufacturing, oil, gas, chemicals, fertilizers, timber, and commodities-trading interests.

The Koch brothers are notoriously known for their wealth and influence, and even for their generous contributions to some good causes. David Koch, for instance, donated enough money to have an exhibition hall named for him at the science-oriented Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins opened in March 2010 with an exhibit and research and education programs dedicated to the discovery and understanding of human origins. This was part of an initiative called *Human Origins: What Does It Mean to Be Human?* These programs focused on the epic story of human evolution and how the defining characteristics of our species have evolved over the last 6 million years as our primate ancestors adapted to a changing world.

The premiere of this new hall helped commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the original opening of the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum. This venture is far more laudable than the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, which promotes fallacy over fact by pretending that a literal reading of the Bible is a plausible explanation for the prehistory of human existence. The Creation Museum is an ignorance-embracing undertaking that denies scientific knowledge and evolutionary understandings. It actually pretends that dinosaurs and human beings lived at the same time, even though dinosaurs had been extinct for 65 million years before our human species came into being.

Most important to this narrative, however, is the role David and Charles Koch have played in what are anti-social and mean-spirited campaigns to obstruct and kill reforms to our economic and political systems. The Koch brothers played a outsized role in almost every major domestic policy dispute in the United States in the past decade or two. Over the years, hundreds of millions of dollars of Koch brothers' money has been given to various right-wing think tanks and front groups and ideologically-biased publications.

Koch groups, for instance, maneuvered to try to stop Barack Obama's efforts, early in his presidency, to stimulate the economy in the wake of the financial crisis that afflicted nations worldwide at the time of the January 2009 Obama inauguration. A Koch-funded group launched television and radio ads that derided the recovery package as

containing wasteful pork barrel spending and bad ideas. It referred to the plan as "the Devil in Disguise". The famous economist John Maynard Keynes would have turned over in his grave. Efforts to keep the international economy from entering another Great Depression were evil?

The conservative Cato Institute, founded by Charles Koch, and other Koch-funded think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, produced a series of reports that distorted the details of the stimulus plan and called instead for tax cuts to give even bigger benefits to corporations and wealthy people. The Koch brothers cynically stuck to the deceptive story that tax cuts for rich people will trickle down to the vast majority of people who have suffered the brunt of hardships associated with economic hard times. No matter how much such strategies can be shown to principally lift the yachts of rich people rather than everyone else's rowboats, this dogma is a favorite rationalization for acting to increase the already glaring disparities and inequities in our societies.

In addition to battling the economic stimulus plan, the organization Americans for Prosperity that was founded in 1984 by David Koch spent the opening months of the Obama presidency helping organize the first Tea Party protests. At that time, these wealthy Koch brother operatives exploited the anger, frustration, feelings of victimization, evangelical fervor, and racial and class prejudices of people in the Tea Party movement to promote their very narrow goals.

Americans for Prosperity (AFP) subsequently made concerted efforts to mobilize Tea Party opposition not only to health insurance reform but also to clean energy legislation and sensible regulations on the banking system and the financial industry.

David Koch pretended to be a champion of science, yet he arguably did more to undermine the public's understanding of climate-change science than any other person in America. The AFP provided financing for a so-called Hot Air tour, a nationwide road show that used a hot air balloon to depict climate change science as "hot air." This organization ran 'populist' ads that mocked environmentalists as spoiled brats who are more concerned about their "three homes and five cars" than they are about economic conditions. How pathetic and ironic! It is, after all, the extremely wealthy Koch billionaires who have acted like spoiled brats who lack empathy for Americans suffering adversities caused in part by policies enabled by the Koch brothers' extremely self-serving political meddling.

The Koch conglomerate has rational profit-oriented reasons to want to block things like climate legislation, clean energy initiatives, carbon taxes, regulatory enforcement, collective bargaining rights for workers, and greater good rules and regulations, but American citizens and our representatives simply should be more responsible and stop allowing such shortsighted and socially irresponsible schemes for externalizing costs onto society.

Since the Koch brothers brazenly opposed any form of climate change legislation, they fired up Tea Party folks to prevent the federal government from taking any steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere. It seems somewhat crazy to refuse to deal with the present and future costs of climate change, but that is the approach taken by the Americans for Prosperity front group. The Koch brothers have a definite financial stake in blocking legislation that would deal with climate change because Koch Industries owns oil refineries that are major carbon dioxide polluters.

Koch Industries enjoys big benefits in the current system that allows huge costs to be externalized. Cost externalizing gambits are like a form of socialism that allows costs to be foisted onto everyone instead of sensibly requiring them to be included in the prices of products produced or services used.

Georgia Pacific, a timber subsidiary of Koch Industries, is a big contributor to causing Earth's "carbon-sink capacity" to be reduced as a result of their chopping down so many trees. And Koch Industries has been responsible for over 300 oil spills in the U.S., and for leaking more than three million gallons of crude oil into drinking water sources and fishery habitats, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Koch brothers have spent tens of millions of dollars on misinformation campaigns and direct lobbying to weaken the chances that legislation will be enacted to mitigate impacts of climate change. A team of Koch-funded operatives attempted to crash the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in early December 2009. The Kochs are partially responsible for scuttling prospects for Congress to pass laws to deal intelligently

with the unfolding climate crisis. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, an organization funded in part by Koch foundations, has waged an underhanded campaign to falsely charge that a set of hacked e-mails somehow refuted the overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is being caused by human activities. I shrug a universal, "Huh?" Denials of crucial problems foolishly create bigger risks.

All of these things, taken together, reaffirm the simple conclusion: We should not allow Big Money to have so much influence in our politics.

Another Aspect of Koch Brothers' Gambits

Much of the fierce opposition to health insurance reform was attributable to organizations funded in part by the Koch billionaires. When the health care debate began, AFP created a front group known as Patients United to attack Democratic proposals for health care reform. This organization bought a barrage of ads that distorted various provisions of health reform legislation, like the proposed public option. In their quest to block health care reform, Koch-funded groups stooped to trying to foster political extremism, as when a speaker with the Patients United Hot Air bus tour repeatedly compared healthcare reform to the Holocaust. A large banner at an AFP health care rally read, "National Socialist Health Care: Dachau, Germany - 1945". The banner reprehensibly depicted a pile of corpses at a concentration camp. Give us a break! The rally featured, among others, Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN), one of the most radically inane members of Congress at the time. Honest debate was thus hijacked by freak-show tactics.

Many people were surprised at the level of anger that AFP managed to channel into town hall meetings concerning healthcare that were held in August 2009. Those efforts were not the first ones that Koch groups made to derail reforms of our costly health insurance and healthcare systems. Back in 1994, Americans for Prosperity, then known by the equally deceptive name Citizens for a Sound Economy, worked closely with the House Speaker at the time, Newt Gingrich, to bring mobs of angry men to health reform rallies that were being held by First Lady Hillary Clinton.

Why have Charles and David Koch been so staunchly opposed to healthcare reform? A main reason is that they want to minimize the cost of employee compensation paid to their employees in the sprawling conglomerate Koch Industries. There is also a deeper, more insidious motive. The Kochs have a long family tradition of funding conservative movements to shift the country to the far right. Their father, Fred Koch, helped found the reactionary John Birch Society in the late 1950s. This ultra-right-wing organization strived to harness Cold War insecurities and channel them into fear and hate toward black people and liberals. The John Birch Society used tactics like warning that President Kennedy and civil rights activists and organized labor were in league with communists. The Society actually characterized sensible reforms as a capitulation to the Soviet Union!

By using such propaganda and strategies, Fred Koch and others who helped fund the John Birch Society were able to galvanize millions of middle class people into supporting their real agenda of cutting corporate taxes and undermining regulations on businesses. Racism, fear and manipulative divisiveness were used to energize this movement, but the bottom line was clear: selfish greed and narrow self-interest were values that superseded all other principles.

How "Conservatism" Resembles Radicalism

Wealthy conservatives like the Kochs and another Republican billionaire, Richard Mellon Sciafe, have used their economic power to establish an interlocking network of foundations to push their agenda and move the Republican Party to the right. They fund conservative media outlets and law firms, in addition to right-wing advocacy groups and think tanks. This is the network that Hillary Clinton described as being a "vast right-wing conspiracy" in 1998 when President Clinton was being mercilessly smeared because of his sexual improprieties and evasions during the Monica Lewinski episode. Richard Mellon Sciafe played a major role in funding efforts to investigate President Clinton and undermine the president in order to give conservative causes greater power.

Don Blankenship, the bullying CEO of Massey Energy, was another wealthy right-wing activist who contributed heavily to Republican candidates to grease the wheels of profit-making operations at the expense of employees. Massey Energy operated the Upper Big Branch coal mine where 29 people died in April 2010 in the worst coal

mining disaster in the U.S. in 40 years. Massey Energy had been cited numerous times for unsafe working conditions at this mine. Don Blankenship was involved on the boards of the National Mining Association and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and was a highly active GOP fundraiser and bankroller known for his outspoken opposition to labor unions.

Some say that Don Blankenship displayed an arrogant ruthlessness that has deep roots in priorities of profit over people. This is one of the less pleasant, though most salient, aspects of our capitalistic economic system. It is as American as apple pie. Human nature has not changed much over the millennia, but human institutions can, and do, and should evolve much faster to enable us to cope with gathering threats to our overall well-being right now and in coming years.

Our systems and leaders are failing us, but sometime soon someone must find a way to unite people and even bring people around who are in "the party of no". Unfortunately, the politics of division have proved to be so convenient for the shrewd demagogue Donald Trump that he has been maniacally intent on imposing a reactionary agenda on the people since his Electoral College coup.

This greater unity of purpose is thus needed even more critically, and it should involve cooperative and constructive ways of coming up with win/win solutions to big problems that are national and international in scope. Thomas Paine was right to call for a more sensible confederation of all the various interests that compete for advantages and privileges and ascendancy, for we surely need our system of laws and lawmakers to be made more flexible to prevent Tragedy-of-the-Commons outcomes and fiscal calamities and catastrophic damage to Earth's ecosystems.

A coal-sludge levee break in Kentucky in the year 2000 resulted in the spill of 300 million gallons of toxic wastes into watersheds. This was one of the worst environmental disasters ever to take place in the southeastern United States. Elaine Chao, the U.S. Secretary of Labor at the time, stopped an investigation into the spill by placing a staffer to her husband in charge. Her husband? The far right Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY). In Sept. 2002, a Political Action Committee of Massey Energy gave \$100,000 to the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which McConnell had previously chaired. Overall, McConnell was one of the top recipients of Massey-related contributions. Don Blankenship's closeness to prominent Republicans helped him land allies at the highest levels of the federal mine safety system during George W. Bush's presidency. Using this position, they acted to weaken mine safety regulations. This is the best government that money can buy!?

In September 2019, Elaine Chao is now the Trump-appointed Secretary of Transportation, and the House Oversight Committee has launched an investigation into allegations of major corruption involving her and her family. She is accused of using her position to get her family members lucrative business opportunities and loans, allegedly totaling hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Federalist Society is another prominent and highly influential conservative organization. This right-leaning organization frames issues in favor of minimal regulations and economic fundamentalism and dogmatic propaganda. The Federalist Society aggressively provides its overly partisan points of view to judges, lawyers, professors, law students, legislators, lobbyists, journalists and the media. In the process, they skew democracy toward undemocratic, elitist and socially harmful dogmas.

The larger context of these conflicts is the centuries-long struggle between capital and labor. Corporations want lower costs and bigger profits, and workers want higher wages and safer working conditions and better benefits. This strife sparked many reforms long ago during the Progressive Era and in subsequent decades, and it helped Franklin D. Roosevelt to enact his New Deal. Such conflicts have also given impetus to a wide variety of legislative attempts to give workers a fairer shake in this sometimes internecine battle.

I recommend that people check out journalist John Cassidy's illuminating 2009 book *How Markets Fail: The Logic of Economic Calamities*. It contains valuable insights into the ways that laissez-faire free market capitalism fails people and society. This book makes it clear that we should restructure our economic and political systems to manage them better. Cassidy sensibly suggests that we should create more intelligently targeted incentives and disincentives. See the insights in Earth Manifesto essays like *The Common Good, Properly Understood*, and *Existence, Economics, and Ecological Intelligence*, for comprehensive understandings.

The Politics of the Supreme Court

The ruling in the *Citizens United* case was made by a narrow 5-to-4 vote. The slim majority was led by Chief Justice John Roberts and Samuel Alito, the two conservative Supreme Court Justices who were appointed by George W. Bush. These men were essentially expressing their dogmatic convictions that giant corporations and other vested interests should have unlimited rights to dominate our politics. Gosh, even conservative Senator John McCain once told reporters he was troubled by the "extreme naïveté" that some of the Supreme Court Justices show about the role of special-interest money in elections and Congressional lawmaking.

The freedom of speech guaranteed to individuals by the First Amendment is assured to all citizens, and it should be recognized that an individual's free speech is completely different than the amplified megaphones of paid speech that wealthy people and large organizations are able to finance using their deep pockets.

Samuel Alito, during his Senate confirmation hearings, indicated he would approach every question "with an open mind and to go through the whole judicial process, which is designed, and I believe strongly in it, to achieve good results, to achieve good decision-making." Really? The *Citizens United* ruling is serving to reduce the impact of free speech rights of individuals as an even greater cascade of money from corporations and wealthy people pours into election ads on television and in other media outlets. A record amount of money was already being spent in political ads in the 2008 presidential election, and this ruling opened the floodgates to even more corporate money in our elections.

This contributes to bad results more than good ones, so it is distinctively contrary to good decision-making. Justice Alito mouthed the words "Not true" during President Obama's first State of the Union speech in denial of the risk and unfairness that the Supreme Court encouraged by opening the floodgates to special interest groups to spend on elections without limits. But the national elections since then have confirmed the validity of this concern that our democracy is being severely undermined by Big Money and the lack of disclosure about who gives financing to politicians and initiatives.

"As scarce as the truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand."

--- Josh Billings

Chief Justice John Roberts, during his own confirmation hearings, stressed his respect for legal precedents. Once they secured their positions, they revealed their true pro-corporate ideological biases and their disdain for the laws of Congress and prior judicial precedents. Were he and Samuel Alito simply lying to Congress and thus to the American people to get their lifetime appointments? Perhaps we would be better off impeaching them than honoring them!

Ha! I'm just kidding! Impeachment is a mechanism established by the U.S. Constitution to allow the American people to hold their government accountable. It was designed to be used whenever officials commit "high crimes and misdemeanors". Lying to the American people was one of the principal grounds upon which Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton were impeached, but we must pick our battles, and this one probably could not be won, given the current entrenched political status quo.

However, after the bruising political battle over the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in 2018, and his more blatant lies and subterfuge in his confirmation hearings, the case for impeaching him is rather more substantive.

I do believe that the appointment of Supreme Court Justices for life-long terms is becoming increasingly inappropriate in light of the need for our society to be more flexible and adaptable to changing times. The Supreme Court is dominated by relatively young conservative Justices who will be affecting our societies for generations to come with their narrowly interpreted ideological decisions.

The guarantee of free speech to the American people, which is contained in the First Amendment, requires a vibrant independent media and rigorous laws to prevent censorship, false arrests and numerous forms of tyranny by the powerful. Free speech is an extremely important provision for a democratic republic, and when free speech is suppressed or denied, a variety of undesirable consequences results. With the ascendance of Donald Trump to power, and his acrimonious charges of critical reporting as FAKE NEWS and investigations of his abuses of power

as a HOAX, and his Stalin-like charges of the free press as being an ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE, the risks to our democratic republic are spiking.

It's frankly astonishing that for a man of such self-proclaimed "stable genius" and "unmatched wisdom", Donald Trump would not have been capable of grasping and respecting the truth Mark Twain once proclaimed, "It's better to keep your mouth closed and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt."

Regimes like the one in Iran are ruled by religious ayatollahs who routinely arrest citizens and imprison them when they dare to speak out or demonstrate against heavy-handed and repressive rule. They even apparently torture or kill people who oppose them, and they deport honest journalists. To prevent such negative outcomes, guarantees of individual free speech are vital. Corporate power, like authoritarian power in a theocratic government, generally undermines the power of individuals.

"Hey, shouldn't we have truth in advertising, and require the organization Citizens United to change its name to <Citizens Divided in Order to Promote Right-Wing Dominance>?"

--- The underground Mole

Tea Party Perspectives and Broader Considerations

Our Founders went to great lengths to ensure fair representation to the people. They recognized the anger expressed by the people of the American colonies during the 1773 Boston Tea Party incident, which was directed against the tyranny of taxation without representation. Today it is imperative for us to find a fairer way to confederate all the competing interests in our nation. To do this we must make sure that no entity is allowed to employ large megaphones that drown out free expression with hyper-partisan, divisive and dishonest messages -- like "BOB IS WRONG!"

And it is simply unacceptable for bully Trump to threaten the free press and put his political opponents at increased risk of physical violence. In mid-October 2019, it was revealed that an inflammatory video was shown during a recent three-day conference sponsored by the Trump-backing group American Priority, a video that depicts a Trump character shooting various people and attacking them.

In the video, Trump's face is superimposed on the body of actor Colin Firth in a scene from the film *Kingsman: The Secret Service*. As the video plays, people are shown with various logos superimposed over their faces. The logos include that of news organizations CNBC, ABC, PBS, Huffington Post, Slate, The New Yorker, Politico, Vice News, The Hill, BBC News, The Washington Post, CBS, Vox, BuzzFeed, NPR and Bloomberg. Other faces superimposed on bodies appear in the video, including those of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, former President Bill Clinton, the late Sen. John McCain, the former FBI Director James Comey, Senator Bernie Sanders, Rep. Adam Schiff of California, members of Black Lives Matter, and other political opponents.

The Trump character shoots many of these people, and finally the rampage ends with the Trump character jamming a sharpened stake through the neck of a man with CNN's logo superimposed over his face.

This video is a clearly a criminal incitement to violence, and it seriously further endangers the lives of many.

When outrage surfaced at this video programming by Trump supporters, Trump's recently new press secretary Stephanie Grisham declared that Trump "strongly condemns" the video showing him killing and otherwise violently assaulting news media outlets and political foes.

Even before the Supreme Court declared sensible limits on campaign finance contributions to be unconstitutional, there was already too much negative campaigning, character assassination, incivility and political machine politicking in our elections.

Modern day Tea Party activists have been duped into getting all fired up about taxes and deficit spending AND at the same time to staunchly oppose spending cuts on their own sacred cows like the military. Tea Party folks thus passionately defend the agenda and prerogatives and propaganda of billionaires. They incoherently clamor against government debt without having any realistic idea about how to achieve a balanced budget in a civilized democratic republic. Cut government employees and public education and environmental protections? Give even more tax cuts

to rich people and giant corporate entities, and allow them even more power and influence, and this will make things better for the disenfranchised majority?

Shall we continue to ignore the best interests of future generations by stimulating profligate consumerism and encouraging the depletion of resources and facilitating the exploitation and pollution of the commons? How likely is it that this course of action will make the average person better off? When staunch opposition arises against progressive initiatives, social justice, immigrants, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence, this is highly unlikely to make the world a better place. When worker organizations are weakened, the none-too-subtle invisible hand of the powerful is not likely to make America freer or fairer or more prosperous. Give us a break!

It is ironic that progressives are being vilified instead of domineering wealthy people. Actually, I do not believe in vilifying anyone: "let's not get mad, let's get even"! A wise Buddhist philosopher would agree with honest spiritual people who say that love is much healthier than hate, and forgiveness is a much more salubrious attitude for everyone concerned than animosity. Whatever! The most important thing is that we identify the comprehensive real nature of problems and then find the best approaches to solving them.

Right wing ideological partisans have hijacked social conservatives in order to advance the narrow agenda of the ruling elite. False populists have made the reflexively conservative crowd think that high taxes are the biggest problem, when in fact the most serious problems stem from low taxes on the wealthiest Americans and on giant corporations, coupled with related high levels of deficit spending year after year after year. This state of affairs was made worse by large sums of economic stimulus spending that was required during the "Great Recession" to get the economy moving after the rashly inflated real estate bubble collapsed.

Another factor in the challenging economic climate has been the inadequate regulation of the banking industry and consequent costly government bailouts required for big banks, the insurance giant AIG, auto companies and the mortgage companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. It should also be quite clear that inadequately controlled spending on military weapons systems and military occupations of foreign countries and a vast network of military bases abroad are things that seriously exacerbate these financial problems.

What we need today is not lower taxes and more debt, but more steeply graduated taxes that are the same or lower for 98% of Americans and higher for the richest 2%. We also need lower taxes for small businesses and higher taxes for highly profitable big businesses. We need the federal government to manage its affairs better, and to stop wasting money on extravagant earmarks and lavish benefits for vested interest groups. Simultaneously, we need to invest intelligently in good public education, vital infrastructure, and smart initiatives that deal with the social ills associated with urban problems, industrialization, globalization, deteriorating transportation systems, predatory banking, wars, and our dependence on fossil fuels.

We need both fiscal responsibility AND more fairness. We should boldly act to mitigate anti-egalitarian trends and the deception and authoritarianism required to enforce such unfairness. The best way to ensure greater fairness in our societies is not by eliminating estate taxes that affect only the richest two-tenths of one percent of Americans, but by making sure that money and power are more fairly distributed to all Americans by reducing the power that money can buy, NOT by increasing it. Take note, radical Supreme Court "conservatives"!

It seems quite apparent that there is a proverbial elephant in the room: the only entities in a good position to help finance a healthier society and to pressure politicians to honestly balance the federal government's budget are wealthy people and highly profitable corporations. Yet rich people and big corporations are too busy milking the system to really help make our societies fairer and more fiscally sound. This is a major reason that short-term-oriented selfishness dominates our decision-making at the expense of the greater good.

No matter what ideological dogma one personally adheres to, it must be admitted that a free society is better than one dominated by powerful and ruthless corporations or governments controlled by them. The long-standing strife between capital and labor will become an even more pitiful contest as corporate money asserts the power of its vastly greater financial resources. Good citizen goals will continue to be swamped by narrower corporate goals and investor goals and consumer goals.

Shall we disresemble the place, Bob? Roger! Positive changes must be made!

An Astonishing Development

The state of Kansas has been trying an interesting economic and social experiment, and one that reveals crucially valuable lessons learned. The people of Kansas were sold a bill of goods in the 2010 elections and ended up electing Republican Sam Brownback as Governor to replace the previous moderate Governor Mark Parkinson, a Republican who had switched parties to become a Democrat due to the bitter divide between moderates and conservatives in the Kansas Republican Party. During that election campaign, Brownback conformed to the dominating conservative ideologies on hot button social issues and he declared that the way to improve the Kansas economy and school funding and the plight of poor people in Kansas would be by cutting taxes.

Immediately after taking office, Governor Brownback and the far right legislature began to advance their tax cutting goals. They slashed top tax rates by 25% or so, and partially offset the resulting lower tax revenues by increasing taxes on the first \$15,000 of income for every taxpayer. Try to imagine living on less than \$15,000 per year, and then finding out that Republican leaders have increased the amount of taxes you pay! This change was a classic instance of a regressive, anti-progressive change in taxation that serves to shift the burden of taxes from high income earners to those who earn lower incomes. I personally find it objectionable for poor people to be required to pay a larger share of the tax burden merely so that high-income earners may pay lower tax rates, but this story gets much worse.

After three years passed in the wake of the recklessly misguided Republican tax change, income tax revenues plummeted so much that the rating on Kansas' bonds suffered a downgrade by Moody's Investors Service on May 1, 2014. This will be expensive for Kansas due to the need to pay higher interest rates on its borrowings, but there are much more negative consequences. The inadequate tax revenues forced reductions to school funding and the social safety net in Kansas, which will have long-term negative effects on the people of Kansas. I encourage everyone to read Thomas Frank's incisive book *What's the Matter of Kansas* to see how "conservative populism" and religious fundamentalism have come to impact the people of Kansas with such negative outcomes. A better understanding of what the matter is with Kansas helps us see one of the main things wrong with our nation as a whole, due to the harmful influences of disingenuous conservative ideologies.

So how did Sam Brownback handle being confronted with this rude and embarrassing proof of the Big Lie at the root of his tax cutting ideology? Sensationally, he refused to admit the significant adversity that his leadership caused to the people of Kansas, and instead he blamed the black man in the White House! "Hell of a job, Brownback!"

Attention, voters in Kansas: You made a mistake to have narrowly reelected Sam Brownback in November 2014, instead of having thrown him out of office! Congratulations on having finally gotten rid of him in January 2018! What mischief is he up to these days, since Donald Trump has made him U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom?

Sadness and Tea Party Madness

The concept of polarity management is introduced in *Common Sense Revival*. The goal of this type of conflict resolution is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of opposing sides of an issue. "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."

I personally regard the Tea Party movement as seriously misguided. But let's examine its strengths. The main positive attribute of Tea Party supporters is their passion and fervent energy. I believe this zeal should be more constructively channeled into common good goals. Unfortunately, the Tea Party has been mobilized to serve the interests of billionaires rather than the greater good. Additionally, the blackmail-like tactics of the Tea Party have created a series of unnecessary economic crises, and are thus proving to be harmful to the best interests of the American people.

Among the worst weaknesses of the Tea Party is its stubborn refusal to deal with sensible reforms of our tax code and our healthcare system. The main focus of the Tea Party since its beginning has been to obstruct reforms of these systems. This was the issue that first galvanized the Tea Party into existence in August 2009 when town

hall meetings concerning healthcare were being conducted across the nation. The Tea Party became the public face of opposition to efforts to implement reforms to our sadly unfair medical system. This central obsession of the Tea Party was to obstruct better plans for addressing the unfairness of our healthcare system. No one can deny that this system of medical care and health insurance is ridiculously costly and distinctly unfair because of its preexisting conditions exclusions, treatment denials, exorbitant costs of prescription drugs, and extremely expensive emergency room care for millions of people who do not have health insurance.

A great irony thus exists in light of the poignant perspective articulated by Martin Luther King: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

This compelling sentiment makes the Tea Party's uncompromising opposition to healthcare reform an obscenely wrongheaded stance. After all, annual costs and inflation in the current system are much too high. Additionally, since almost 50 million people were not covered by health insurance before the Affordable Care Act, these folks generally do not get preventative treatment, which is one of the best ways to achieve better health. Also, the high costs of emergency room medical care for this large number of Americans are foisted onto everyone else. Mitt Romney once characterized this as a form of socialism. It is actually a default form of misguided capitalism, but these are just simplistic labels given to this dysfunctional state of the status quo of our healthcare system.

The Tea Party opposed a single-payer system of universal healthcare, despite the fact that this would have been the best plan for the American people, because coverage for *everyone*, and at a lower overall cost, would be a superior way to spread risks and costs through insurance. The Tea Party, having in effect been brainwashed by the Koch brothers, opposed a public option in the Affordable Care Act reform that would have given people a choice other than selecting one of the private insurance providers that have contributed to making such a costly shambles of the current system.

The Affordable Care Act was modeled on the plan passed by Mitt Romney when he was the Republican Governor of Massachusetts. This plan requires everyone to participate in the health insurance system, thereby spreading risks more broadly. Under such a plan, if people choose not to participate, they are required to pay a fine. This is far from a perfect system, but better than none.

A system of universal health care would be much more ethical and just than the current system. Right-wing billionaires and profit-driven health insurance and drug companies oppose fair-minded reforms, but it is absurd to allow them the power to prevent sensible changes to our current system.

Fast forward to October 3, 2019, and Donald Trump has just signed an executive order that his communications team hyped as "defending Medicare from socialist destruction." Here's the insidious truth: this executive order is a form of "backdoor privatization" of Medicare. Trump has been trying to cut spending on healthcare for years, and his devious spin and sabotage of the Affordable Care Act will not help the problem.

Republican Folly

The Tea Party has been convinced that healthcare reform and the national debt are two of the worst problems facing the nation. As a result, they forced a partial shutdown of the federal government that lasted 16 days in October 2013, and they threatened to force the U.S. to default on its debt obligations. This stunt turned out to be a public relations disaster for the Republican Party.

You have to laugh at the antics of Ted Cruz, the Tea Party Republican and junior Senator from Texas whose attention-getting efforts have made him resemble a modern day Don Quixote. Don Quixote was a literary character who made rhetorical orations on chivalrous knighthood and decided to go on a knight-errant adventure in which he ended up mistaking windmills for ferocious giants and attacking them on his hack horse Rocinante. Ted Cruz railed nearly as bizarrely against what he misperceives and misconstrues as monstrous efforts made to reform healthcare.

Don Quixote was "mostly a rational man of sound reason," but he had become fixated on ideas in books of chivalry that led to "the distortion of his perception and the wavering of his mental faculties." He undertook "an importune, unfounded and vain effort against confabulated adversaries for a vain goal".

Cruz emulated Don Quixote's quixotic quest when he grandstanded before the Senate in an effort to gain personal attention by staging a 21-hour filibuster-style protest against the Affordable Care Act in September 2013. This endeavor turned out to be a misadventure because it was based on misguided ideologies and misinterpretations of reality. Cruz' antics, and those of the Tea Party in general, contributed to this foolishly futile and costly government shutdown. The Houston Chronicle, the largest newspaper in Texas, expressed regret that it had endorsed Ted Cruz when he was a candidate for the U.S. Senate. Then in 2015, Ted Cruz thought he deserved to be President. Sadly for the people of Texas, he was very narrowly reelected as Senator in 2018.

Ted Cruz' approval ratings were laughably low after his ridiculous grandstanding episode, but you know what? In politics, they say "no publicity is bad publicity", and name recognition can have immense value, almost regardless of how it is achieved. Ted Cruz had seen the sudden national fame that Wendy Davis, the Texas state Senator from Fort Worth, had gained after she took a courageous stand against anti-abortion legislation in Texas by engaging in an 11-hour filibuster in the state Senate. This was no doubt a factor in Cruz' decision to make a hero-defiant filibuster of his own, even though it made him look like a fool. Some surprisingly say that Ted Cruz is one of the most intelligent politicians in the Republican Party, so his atavistic stances must be seen as a gamble to gain notoriety (and money) for the "purity" of his stubborn refusal to compromise.

Conservative columnist Debra Saunders took stock of the government shutdown in October 2013 and observed: "In Washington, a rump group of Republicans preferred a grudge match over governing -- and incurred the public's wrath." Ha ha ha! -- "a rump group of Republicans!" I hoped at the time that this deserved smackdown of stubbornness would lead to an honest reassessment of conservative goals. These Republicans should stop marching lemming-like to the tune of the agenda of billionaires, and instead begin to seek common cause with the 99% of Americans who are being harmed by misgoverning, corrupt electioneering, the gerrymandering of congressional districts, and the sad distorting effects of religious fundamentalism in our politics.

Another minor player in this farcical Tea Party drama was Rep. Ted Yoho, a Republican from Florida, who suggested that it would actually be a good thing to default on our national debt. Listen. It's actually a very good idea NOT to default on our obligations, but instead to manage our affairs more fairly and with greater fiscal responsibility. The time to dispute the amount of money you owe is BEFORE making a commitment to incur an obligation, NOT when the bills come due! Good ideas for better ways to manage the government are contained throughout *Common Sense Revival*.

Tea Party politicians almost appear to have abandoned sanity by refusing to conduct any business in the House of Representatives during Barack Obama's time in office, other than launching assaults against the Affordable Care Act and the rights of women to use contraceptives or get an abortion under any circumstances. Since 2010, Republicans have obsessed over their narrow goal of repealing the Affordable Care Act, tortuously voting on more than 60 occasions to undermine this effort to make healthcare fairer. Since Trump came to power, they have failed to repeal the plan.

The history of conservatives spending great amounts of time and energy demonizing healthcare reform is long. Curiously, Ronald Reagan spoke out forcefully against "socialized medicine" in 1961. Think about this. Reagan strongly opposed the program that became Medicare. He actually warned repeatedly about a loss of freedoms if we chose to have any government programs that helped cover people's medical care. Today, all the people who adhere to Tea Party ideologies should do a little introspection when they hear themselves absurdly declare, "Keep your government hands off my Medicare!"

Notably, our freedoms did not all go away after government Medicare was enacted and expanded. Instead, this social safety net program keeps millions of older people out of the chains of disastrous destitution when their health begins to fail in the waning years of their lives.

More Republican Folly

Social conservatism and the attempt to impose a rigid hegemony over the people are having harmful effects on America. This is one reason that a series of manufactured crises have been bedeviling the American people in

recent years, like that bizarre 16-day partial shutdown of the federal government that was accompanied by serious threats by far right Republicans to force the U.S. to default on its debt obligations.

Until Trump came to power, conservative politicians combined obstructionist initiatives with an evangelical Johnny-come-lately born-again concern about the national debt. It might be recalled that, as Republicans railed against increasing the national debt limit in October 2013, such limits had been increased routinely when Republicans controlled Congress and the White House under George W. Bush. Back then, Republicans repeatedly rubber-stamped every increase in the national debt because they found it to be so expedient in justifying the financing of historically low tax rates on people with the highest incomes.

It is as if Republicans live in a narrow echo chamber in an insane asylum with ideological propaganda bombarding them 24/7, because they seized on the cockamamie idea that the best way to control the ballooning national debt is to threaten to stop paying obligations that have already been incurred. This course of action caused a heightened risk of a downgrade in our national creditworthiness, and if they had not finally caved in ignominiously, it is highly likely that severe repercussions would have resulted -- as they did in Kansas.

Republicans have for years been making sworn pledges to shrink the government down to the size that it can be drowned in a bathtub, like stubborn iconoclast Grover Norquist notoriously demands. I'll wager that Republicans don't have the spine to take many more suicidal steps toward actualizing this goal. Such a course of action, after all, would involve disastrous economic carnage and a horrendous human toll. Such extremism in the name of ideology would make their temper tantrum over the Affordable Care Act look like a mere momentary infantile mood meltdown compared to an onslaught of a full-blown epileptic fit.

"Even the freedom loving, anti-tax, anti-government, anti-healthcare-reform, anti-Obama, anti-collective bargaining, anti-egalitarian, anti-women, anti-immigration, anti-minority rights, anti-democratic and anti-environmental billionaires who bankroll conservative agitators will turn against the warped Stupid Wing of the Republican Party long before their obtuse obstructionism completely eviscerates the government and derails the international economy. Since Charles and David Koch and other greedy billionaires provided generous support to conservative front groups to advance their exceptionally narrow-minded agenda, when government austerity programs begin to seriously damage their business prospects, they will change their tune."

--- The underground Mole

As near as I can figure, conservative billionaires want the government to be weakened so that corporate and individual taxes will remain near 90-year lows. A collateral advantage of a weak federal government is that policies related to labor relations, the environment and public lands can be made more favorable to corporate interests. But once financial constrictions associated with truly concerted efforts to slash the size of government begin to torpedo the economy, the government would be forced to reduce subsidies to big businesses, and this would quickly cause billionaires to alter their strategies.

"Prophecy is a good line of business, but it is full of risks."

--- Mark Twain

The federal government will spend just over \$4 trillion in the fiscal year ending September 30, 2019, and Republicans will cease their ideological insistence on slashing government spending long before they succeed in dramatically shrinking the size of government. That goal is a laughable fool's errand because the severe spending cuts required to significantly shrink the size of the federal government would plunge the U.S. into turmoil and the world economy into chaos. Hell, even suddenly balancing the budget in the next year or two by slashing spending would tip the global economy back into recession. This would reduce tax revenues and make deficits worse. It is verily preposterous to suppose that a salubrious freedom-engendering rebirth of good times would materialize if only government spending were to be slashed enough to satisfy Grover Norquist.

I call on Republicans to purge their political party of slavish obedience to corporate manipulators like the Koch network billionaires and Tea Party extremists and religious fundamentalists. Stances are just too retrograde that staunchly oppose things like infrastructure investments and programs that provide a modicum of security for the growing ranks of poor people. Likewise, it is a big gamble for a political party to oppose socially positive things like

environmental protections, public broadcasting, contraception, reproductive rights for women, and human rights for gay people.

According to assessments by the journalist Thomas Friedman, the House of Representatives under Republican hegemony became "a small-minded, parochial place where collaboration is considered treason, where science is considered a matter of opinion, where immigration is considered a threat, where every solution is a suboptimal compromise enacted at midnight, and where every day we see proof of the theory that America is a country that was <designed by geniuses so that it could be run by idiots>".

A strain of anarchy pervades Grover Norquist's "Taxpayer Protection Pledge" and his avowed goal to shrink the government down until it can be drowned in a bathtub. This anarchic sentiment makes the memory cogent of Theodore Roosevelt's eulogy for president William McKinley. After McKinley was assassinated by a professed anarchist at the height of his popularity in September 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition world's fair in Buffalo, New York, Roosevelt declared anarchy to be a political blight that is "a crime against the whole human race; and all mankind should band against the anarchist."

Even in the throes of a childish tantrum at not getting their way, Tea Party folks should find a better way forward than sabotaging the economy and holding the American public hostage. Heroic defiance may appeal to angry and insecure people, but they should remember the sarcasm and ridicule with which Missourian Mark Twain haunts those who act in idiotic and hypocritical ways.

Adaptive flexibility is the mainstream of evolutionary survival. Inflexibility and intransigence is a dead end. Cooperation is the magnetic true north of human coexistence, especially as civilizations have grown in complexity and population density. In distinct contrast, both ruthless competition and stubborn opposition to fair-minded compromises are sometimes the hallmarks of failure. We know *What's the Matter with Kansas*, and with its Tea Party adherents, who exhibit anti-progressive tendencies. It is conservative billionaires, NOT grassroots populists and the middle class, who gain from national policies that promote social inequities and facilitate the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few.

Republicans have adamantly clung to their ideological conviction that healthcare reform is evil incarnate, and that the federal government is an unfolding disaster, and that the black man in the White House somehow got to be President even though he is some sort of Kenyan socialist Muslim fascist anti-Christ.

This line of thinking leads to a surprising conundrum. While the overall material quality of our lives has taken a great leap forward in many ways over the last 100 years, there are always factions that resist progress and cling to old ways of thinking, especially when rapid changes are taking place. Denials of biological evolution by those who believe in literal interpretations of the Bible, for instance, or denials of trends and causative factors contributing to climate change, can have serious adverse consequences. So it is stunning to find out that a major political party in the U.S. actually embraces irrational absurdities.

White supremacy and racist biases have had to go underground in our society in recent decades to conceal their true nature behind a cloak of deception and denial. Many white people in the Bible Belt pretend not to be racists or bigots, so they hide behind narrow ideological arguments and socially conservative politicians to get them to support initiatives that are contrary to the best interests of minorities. In doing so, they pander to the economic agenda of anti-progressive billionaires.

People in the Bible Belt of the South are acting as if this region of religious conservatism is a chain that binds them to reactionary opposition to change in our society. And there is a pathetic reason why! The majority of voters in the South supported Democratic politicians for 100 years after Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, had freed black slaves during the Civil War. But then in the past 50 years, the majority of white voters in the South have switched to consistently favor Republicans, and again the reason is racially oriented. It is because Democrats led the movement to end racial segregation in the 1960s, and to give black people fairer civil rights. Racism has become more unspoken, but it sure as heck still exists in the South, and in spades!

To be fair, the South does have its charms. It is "a region of great contradictions, holding both savagery and sweetness, church-goers and evildoers, good cooking and bad." These are the words of the southern writer, John

Egerton, who died in November 2013. An obituary published in national newspapers on November 22 provided interesting perspective:

"A son of the South who grew up when the Ku Klux Klan was almost as mainstream there as the Rotary Club, Mr. Egerton (pronounced EDGE-er-ton) used the written word, humility and ultimately the power of the Southern table to champion racial reconciliation and lead a new generation of writers and cooks to look beyond clichés and divisions to understand the region."

Dante imagined in *The Divine Comedy* that two keys are needed to open the gate of Purgatory for a chance at redemption, a silver key for remorseful penitence and a gold key for reconciliation. Dante regarded both these qualities as necessary for salvation. This great allegorical poem represents the true Christian life and explores the nature of sin, vice and virtue, and moral issues in politics and the Church. I heartily encourage the religious faithful to consider these ideas, and to seek penitence and salvation in fairer attitudes toward all people.

Anyone who works zealously to enshrine injustices deserves the harsh opinion of those they so harm, and of people who sympathize with those upon whom unfair actions are perpetrated. The reaction against the feminist movement of the 1960s has been strong, especially in the traditionalist religious states of the South. This bastion of white male supremacism, and of poorly concealed sexism and racism, contributes to keeping the South a relatively backward place. If the people of the South want to dispute this characterization, I encourage them to take honest steps to treat females more fairly, so that southern states will not share with Utah the rating of being the worst states in the Union for women in terms of fair pay, political representation and health care.

"It is the glory and the greatness of our tradition to speak for those who have no voice, to remember those who are forgotten, to respond to the frustrations and fulfill the aspirations of all Americans seeking a better life in a better land."

--- The late Senator Edward Kennedy

An Aside on Dante's Circles

Think about Auguste Rodin's best-known sculpture, *The Thinker*. August Rodin originally called his masterpiece *The Poet*, for it commemorated Dante Alighieri, perhaps the greatest epic poet in world history. This sculpture was a part of a monumental portal that Rodin was commissioned to create for a museum in Paris. Though this museum was never actually built, many of Rodin's original sculptures from this portal were enlarged and became famous works of art on their own.

The theme of *The Thinker* was Dante's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, the allegorical masterpiece written just over 700 years ago. *The Divine Comedy* has three parts, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* -- Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Rodin's original Thinker sits atop a portal looking down on the characters in *Inferno*, as if it is Dante brooding reflectively on the many well-known people from his contemporary times and from earlier history who he imagined to be in Hell. Some scholars have even suggested that *The Thinker* is a representation of Adam contemplating the destruction brought upon mankind because of Adam and Eve's "original sin" in the Garden of Eden.

Rodin called his portal project *The Gates of Hell*. He thereby linked it to a famous Renaissance work that had Biblical themes itself, Ghiberti's gilded bronze doors on the octagonal Baptistry in the Piazza del Duomo in Florence, Italy. When Michelangelo first saw these doors, he had called the beautiful sculpted portico *The Gates of Paradise*.

These reflections give rise to provocative ideas and some more circular thinking, and lead me to refer to an opinion set forth by a blogger named Zach Beauchamp. Consider it after this quick digression.

The Author Offers an Aside

Readers will no doubt note the redundancy of many observations in these Earth Manifesto writings. I have long admired poet David Whyte's remarkable voice and evocative use of repetition in his readings of poetry. Earth Manifesto essays, however, tend to be repetitive for a different reason. The most cogent ideas keep recurring

due to the passionate conviction with which I perceive them, as the manifesto evolves, and as the swirling course of events repeatedly reveals their relevance and evokes their truth anew.

I've created an unwieldy monster in the 12 books of the Earth Manifesto, impassioned and repetitious, as ideas jostle for expression and priority. In the throes of birth, parts of the umbilical cord are being severed and discarded to launch this baby into its independent existence. In the middle of this catharsis, the image comes to me of Thomas Paine having worked hard to express the passions of the larger causes that drove him to write *Common Sense* in 1776.

Another image arises simultaneously, and it is also one of expanding awareness and potential personal transformation. It is an image of Dante, bereft at his forced exile from his hometown of Florence in central Italy, furious composing his stunningly complex condemnation of villains, bad actors and greedy people in his *Nine Circles of Hell*. This image expands as Dante made an imaginary journey through Purgatorio en route to a reunion in Paradiso with Beatrice, with whom he had a powerful chivalrous infatuation. On this journey, accompanied by Virgil, a paragon of reason, Dante experienced psychological and spiritual growth and healing as he grappled with the intense angst of perceived inequities in the world.

The Five Circles of Hell in the Conservative Constellation

Zach Beauchamp wrote an opinion piece titled *How Racism Caused the Shutdown*. It may sound like a stretch, but Beauchamp convincingly delves into the curious connections between conservatism and racism in our society today. He talks about how the battle over civil rights produced a rigidly homogenous Republican party that is disproportionately Southern, and how this has created fertile soil for the sort of "purity contest" you see consuming the South. "There's no zealot like a new convert, the saying goes, and the South's new faith in across-the-board conservatism -- kicked off by the alignment of economic libertarianism with segregationism -- is one of the most significant causes of the ideological inflexibility that's caused the shutdown."

Another blogger describes in detail what he calls the Five Circles of Conservative Hell. Unlike the circles in *Dante's Inferno*, "these are primarily states of pain and suffering that conservatives seek to impose on others in this earthly world -- or places of torment where they drag their fellow Americans for company." At the time these words were first written, Republican offensives were particularly opposed to food stamps and increases in minimum wages, giving credence to the charge that the GOP is waging "a war on the poor". Extreme reactionary forms of conservatism can obviously be highly negative for our society as a whole!

The five circles of Conservative Hell are:

- Repeal the Enlightenment
- Repeal the Constitution
- Repeal the New Deal
- Preserve the Aristocracy
- Preserve Cultural Privilege

Conservatives often rationalize their stances by blaming liberals and the government, and unions, and the poor, and immigrants, and Muslims, and gay people, and non-Christians, and atheists. I blame them for these attitudes! Ha! Conservatives should look in the mirror and see where much of the blame actually lies for our failure to move forward together to a more salubrious future.

These words may be inflammatory, and might not be valuable in creating harmony and collaboration, so please take them with a grain of salt. I hope to purge some of this cynical strain from these writings, though given the sadly retrogressive nature of conservative opposition, and with the bias of my perspectives, this goal is hard to achieve. Consider, for instance, the provocative perspective of the Senior Washington Correspondent Dan Froomkin, who provides compelling pause for thought:

... according to longtime political observers Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, campaign coverage in 2012 was a particularly calamitous failure, almost entirely missing the single biggest story of the race: Namely, the radical right-wing, off-the-rails lurch of the Republican Party, both in terms of *its agenda* and *its relationship to the truth*.

Mann and Ornstein are two longtime centrist Washington fixtures who ... dramatically rejected the strictures of 'false equivalency' that bind so much of the capital's media elite, and they publicly concluded that GOP leaders have taken on the role of an "insurgent outlier" and become "ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition." ...

Lies from Republicans in general -- and standard-bearer Mitt Romney in particular -- were not limited to the occasional TV ads. The party's most central campaign principles -- that federal spending doesn't create jobs, and that reducing taxes on the rich could create jobs and lower the deficit -- willfully disregarded the truth.

Under the Trump administration, this Bizarro World has gotten much worse. What are *We the People* to do in the face of such a state of affairs?

Facts, Fiction, and Enchiladas

Much of the rest of this essay came from my germinating files and was penned and included here some years ago, with a smattering of more recent additions. It does contain some relevant and valid perspectives, so please keep reading!

Mitt Romney once told President Obama in a debate: "You're entitled, Mr. President, as the president, to your own airplane and your own house, but not to your own facts." That statement was bizarre, considering that Romney himself used his own "facts" promiscuously, apparently making them up as he went. His bizarrely ironic declaration that President Obama is not entitled to his own facts is a classic instance of "projection".

In psychology, projection is one of the most primitive of all defense mechanisms. It is one of Karl Rove's most cynically Machiavellian tactics. For years Rove has charged opponents with exactly what he himself and his Party have been guilty of themselves. For instance, Rove exploited the politics of fear, so he accused President Obama of using the politics of fear. Rove snubbed news outlets that he considered partisan when he was Senior Advisor to George W. Bush in the White House, and then he accused President Obama of snubbing news outlets that he considered partisan. Rove questioned the motives of those with whom he disagreed, and then accused President Obama of questioning the motives of those with whom he disagrees.

Curiously, when Mitt Romney was running for president, his campaign used a blitz of disingenuous attack ads, dishonest tactics and outright lying to try to sell the American people on the desirability of choosing him to lead our country. One spokesman for the Romney camp actually tried to justify the deceptive nature of their attack ads against Barack Obama by candidly remarking, "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers." Nice going, guys!

Once again I think of P.J. O'Rourke's incisive observation: "The Republicans are the party that says that government doesn't work -- and then gets elected and proves it."

The Exaggerated Myth of Makers and Takers

Mitt Romney indulged in shrewd ploys in his efforts to get elected president by telling people whatever they wanted to hear. He flip-flopped on many issues, as if emulating a wily deceiver who was on the path toward Dante's eighth circle of hell in *The Divine Comedy*. He preyed on people's trust, hope, and gullibility in his attempt to gain power. His morphing visions were hyper-amplified by means of the use of secretive Super PAC-funded spin and ideological rhetoric.

"Oh what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive."

--- Sir Walter Scott

It is an auspicious development for the well-being of our society that voters soundly rejected Romney's presidential bid and the candidacy of a good number of other even more extreme right-wing politicians of the misguided Tea Party.

Thomas Paine would be scratching his head if he were around to witness these developments today. He would be astounded at our modern day lack of common sense when we allow rich people and giant corporations to run roughshod over the greater good. He had forcefully advocated independence of the American colonies from abuses of power by the British in 1776, so he would no doubt be studying his Bible with renewed zeal and furiously penning a new treatise in support of the independence of the American people from the tyranny of abuses of corporate power, if he were alive today. Let's respect his perceptive and fair-minded intuitions, and act to establish fairer laws that ensure our nation, and all countries in the world, will enjoy greater freedom from this new form of tyranny.

Thomas Paine argued that conservatism and tradition should not be allowed to obstruct all efforts at fair-minded reform. He further insisted that monarchy and aristocracy should be replaced by a more honest form of democratic governance. He expressed support for a steeply graduated system of taxation that would distribute concentrated wealth somewhat more equitably. In such a system, he envisioned a progressively structured tax system that would help finance efforts to allay poverty, reduce unemployment, give every child a good education, and provide a pension for all workers in their old age. Thanks, Tom -- Good ideas!

Assessing the Republican Base

Let's be fair. Mitt Romney had good reason to seem like "a well-oiled weathervane". He was a more sensible and moderate politician as Governor of Massachusetts, but then he was forced to try to wrest the Republican nomination from a strange and fractious coalition of religious fundamentalists, social conservatives, frustrated small businessmen, exploitive capitalists, opponents of healthcare reform and collective bargaining rights for workers, people who scapegoat immigrants, apologists for unlimited corporate power, angry taxpayers, billionaires, deluded deniers of science, patriarchal dominionists, Strict Father absolutists, and gun lovers.

Mitt had to pander to this wacko right-wing fringe and abandon the more centrist zone that once represented the Republican Party when it had more honorable integrity. He had to suck up to the extreme right because he was competing with characters like Newt Gingrich, Donald Trump, Michelle Bachmann, Hermann Cain, Rick Perry, Ron Paul, Sarah Palin and Rick Santorum. This set him up to have a hell of a hard time once he got the nomination to shiftily alter course like an Etch-A-Sketch. Good God!

The Republican base wanted a candidate who would represent their extreme positions. They wanted a candidate who would guarantee them that women would be denied reproductive rights and all freedom of self-determination if they got pregnant. Many of them wanted an ironclad guarantee that legal "rights of personhood" would be assured for a woman's egg as soon as it was fertilized by a sperm, no matter how the squiggly little guy got into her fallopian tubes. The Republican base wanted more radical positions on tax cuts, reductions in the size of government, the elimination of social programs and federal agencies, and the rejection of all initiatives designed to control military spending and access to guns. The Republican base also wanted to repeal the healthcare reform bill passed by Democrats in Congress in 2009, so they were uneasy about the fact that it had been created on a template that used the same mechanisms and rationales as the Massachusetts healthcare law enacted by Mitt Romney in 2006. Flip flop!

One of the Republican strategies in the 2012 elections was to pretend that their takeover attempt is approved by Almighty God. They wanted the American people to believe that their attempt to gain more power is a reflection of supreme righteousness and the sanctity of family values and honorable commitments to the greater good of the people. But that's so contradictory! A look at the stated political platform of the Republican Party and the details of its economic plans, make it clear that their stated proposals and party planks would have created exceedingly unfair outcomes, like they are doing today in Kansas after the state has followed the orthodoxy of Republican ideology.

The Probable Perspective of Jesus Christ

Jesus would likely regard today's Tea Party and Freedom Caucus adherents as delusional collaborators with rich people and the authoritarian wing of political parties. Jesus was, after all, a revolutionary who opposed the oppressive hegemony of Roman occupiers of his homeland in ancient Palestine, and he also spoke out against

moneychangers and the corrupt priestly aristocracy of the Temple establishment in old Jerusalem. Jesus came from the Galilee region to the northwest of Jerusalem, and he lived in tumultuous times when apocalyptic expectations were running rampant. He preached of a God who etched Ten Commandments in stone that practically defined the tenets of in-group morality. This God advocated mercy and forgiveness for the poor and downtrodden among his people, the Jews, yet called for the utter annihilation of those who opposed "Him".

The conservative faithful today oppose fairer treatment of farmers and workers to the extent that they inadvertently support an agenda promoted by far right billionaires who have bankrolled organizations opposed to the collective bargaining rights of workers, and against government rules and regulations and programs designed to help people who are poor and desperate.

"If Jesus came back today, you wouldn't be able to hear him talk over Christians calling him a socialist. He was a peaceful, radical and non-violent revolutionary who hung out with lepers and crooks, never spoke English, wasn't an American citizen, was anti-wealth, anti-death penalty, and anti-public prayer ... he was never anti-gay, never anti-abortion, and never anti-premarital sex ... he was long-haired, brown-skinned, homeless, and a Middle Eastern Jew."

--- John Fugelsang

Civil War Breaks Out in Republican Ranks!

The government shutdown in October 2013 and threats of defaulting on our debt were like a suicidal Charge of the Light Brigade, a foolhardy charge by a British cavalry contingent during the Crimean War in 1854 that was made famous in a poem penned by Alfred Lloyd Tennyson. It was a direct cavalry assault against an artillery battery that produced very high British casualties but no decisive gains. Tennyson's poem emphasized the valor of the cavalry in bravely carrying out their orders despite the suicidal folly of the obvious outcome. It would take a masterful poet to spin the modern day right-wing assault against the ramparts of reason into a valorous undertaking!

Internal dissention and turmoil broke out within the Republican Party after the government shutdown debacle. One faction in this uncivil war said that political positions that are too extreme will cause their party to be relegated to minority status for years to come. The opposing faction adamantly stuck with its counterintuitive story that the party is not conservative enough. Good luck, guys, and may the victor be the side that honestly has the better ideas for the greater good!

In 2016, I expressed the conviction that surely conservatism was achieving maximum influence, and we would soon witness the beginning of their decline. Trump will hasten this, and reveal a profound and disgusting shame of the scheming Republican Party for supporting such an anti-democratic agenda. They seem destined to lose influence because their actions are too egregiously unfair, and their beliefs are too pigheaded and the dogmas they have faith in are contrary to the common good. I recommend that conservatives seriously consider the demographics of America in their anti-immigrant stances, and the optics of their political positions in opposing women's rights and prerogatives. I further suggest that they pay attention to broader ideas, not just those "corn pone opinions", as Mark Twain would have called them, in the echo chambers of their tortuously gerrymandered congressional districts!

John Fowles makes clear in *The Aristos* that many movements of opposition are like Charges of the Light Brigade. Often they are disastrous failures in undertakings that are admired for their bold hero-defiant resolve, even though it would be more rational and accurate to regard them as wasteful, futile and socially harmful.

Introspection into Gun Violence in the U.S.

Way too many incredibly tragic mass shootings have taken place in recent years, including the one at a country music festival in Las Vegas in October 2017 that killed 58 people and inflicted bullet injuries on more than 400 more, with the ensuing panic injuring hundreds more. It is unbelievable that our representatives have failed to pass any meaningful legislation to deal with this mounting threat to public safety. And why? -- Mainly because of the nefarious influence of the right-wing National Rifle Association on the Republican Party and our politics and our society.

Think about the shooting tragedy occurred in Tucson, Arizona in January 2011, which involved a seriously disturbed 22-year-old white male who shot 19 people, killing six of them. The gunfire was an attempt to assassinate U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, a congressional Democrat from Arizona. This shooting was done with a semi-automatic weapon that would have been illegal from 1994 to 2004 under the provisions of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban. This sensible ban expired in 2004, and it has not been renewed. Why not?! Because of the unduly powerful and unwarranted influence of the NRA and the Second Amendment fanaticism of many of its members, along with the affiliated ranks of lobbyists that this extreme-right organization uses to prevent the passage of reasonable gun laws.

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy."

--- Martin Luther King, Jr.

This shooting exposed deep anxieties among hyper-stressed Americans and a host of negative psychological changes that accompany widespread economic insecurity. Mental health is becoming a big issue in the U.S., and our society is unnecessarily vulnerable and insecure in part because of "on-your-own-economic policies" and the "tough love" policies that go hand-in-hand with attitudes focused on providing the most benefits in our society to people who are already exceptionally privileged.

Remember that the Tea Party ran a bunch of candidates for office in the 2010 elections that fervently coveted guns and often used violent imagery. Sharron Angle, the failed Tea Party candidate for Senate in Nevada, called for "Second Amendment remedies". We emphatically do not need violent remedies to our national problems. This heated rhetoric is symbolic of a deep lack of civility in our national discourse. People attack other people rather than their opinions, and many partisans use violent metaphors like calls to put Democrats "in the crosshairs". And they shout *Don't Tread on Me* while giving staunch support to the NRA and its agenda of allowing anyone to buy guns, ammunition and assault weapons with the minimum possible restrictions.

The process of confederating all the competing interests in our society is one that should involve intelligent and well-informed debate, and should culminate in the ballot box, not in a hail of bullets. It is unfortunate for our democracy that wealthy people and the gun lobby have such domineering influence in the intense competition of interests in our society, because this leads to many outcomes disastrously contrary to the greater good.

Homo Politicus

Many politicians are more concerned with their personal status in Washington D.C. society than with public service or working together to achieve common good goals. They often are motivated by money and power. The Republican Party has become much more extreme in the past decade, and increasingly more anti-government as Tea Party and Freedom Caucus politicians have wielded hard-core, no-compromise approaches. Centrist Republican politicians have lost many elections to more reactionary candidates, including Governor Charlie Crist of Florida who lost his battle to Marco Rubio in a Republican primary for a Senate seat, and Richard Lugar, a 35-year member of the Senate and one of Washington's leading experts on U.S. foreign policy, who lost his bid for reelection to Tea Party conservative Richard Mourdock. It was Mourdock who made bizarre remarks about "legitimate rape" that proved he was too extreme to beat his Democratic opponent in the general election.

Nate Silver, the brilliant election analyst, did an instructive analysis in 2012 that revealed that only 6 of the 27 moderate Republicans in the Senate in 2007 would still be in the Senate in 2013, while 17 of 28 conservatives would still be in office. The problem with hopes for a resurgence of more centrist candidates is that a majority -- 54 percent -- of Republicans declare their conviction that the party's leadership isn't *conservative enough*.

Meanwhile, "Blue Dog" Democrats who identify themselves as moderate or conservative have lost many seats in Congress. Their numbers declined from 54 members in the House of Representatives in 2010 to only 14 in 2013, when Republicans gained control of the House. Thus the two parties have become increasingly polarized, and consensus in solving our national problems is becoming much more difficult to achieve.

When Republicans in Congress stubbornly forced the government shutdown by refusing to enact a necessary spending bill by October 1, 2013, an editorial in the Wall Street Journal provided an interesting perspective:

"Kamikaze missions rarely turn out well, least of all for the pilots ... The kamikazes could end up ensuring the return of all-Democratic rule."

And sure enough, just think about this. If a total of only 78,000 votes in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania had been for Democrats instead of Republicans, the electoral college would have ratified the verdict of the 3-million more voters that voted Democratic than Republican in the 2016 election, and right now we would have a Democratic president, a Democratic House and a Supreme Court with a 5-to-4 majority of progressive Justices.

The Role of Unions in Our Society

Here is another crucial consideration in our Citizens Disunited world. The establishment of the economy and politics in the U.S. has become increasingly contrary to democratic fairness, and this state of affairs has been made worse by the Supreme Court's ruling in the *Citizens United* case. This narrow decision has allowed labor unions as well as large corporations to spend freely on elections. Note that it could be a potentially positive thing to give unions more influence because more collective bargaining rights for workers would establish a better balance of power and help achieve greater democratic fairness and saner decision-making.

But let's do the math. Corporations make trillions of dollars of profit annually in the international economy, which conducted a total of about \$70 trillion in activities in 2012. Unions and non-profit organizations have drastically more difficulty raising money. Which entities are most likely to have the most money to influence elections? Duh!

Union representation of American workers peaked more than 50 years ago with about 36% of all workers belonging to unions. This was a significant reason that the number of people in the middle class grew so robustly in the decades following World War II. Today only about 12% of all workers belong to unions, and a mere 8% of private sector workers. Partially as a consequence, working people in the United States are now working longer hours on average for lower wages and benefits, after the effects of inflation are taken into account.

American workers put in the longest hours of any nation in the developed world. The U.S. also has "the most family-hostile public policies" due to a lack of subsidized child care or paid family leaves or mandatory sick leave. There are also few limits on mandatory overtime, or protected rights to request flexibility on the job. So much for "family values"!

How has it come to pass that workers have been saddled with this undesirable state of affairs? Why has the decline in representation been so pronounced in the private sector? The principal reason is because of the increase in the power of corporations. This is another reason we need to find more effective ways to rein in the overweening power of big corporations in our economy and politics.

The rise of power of unions in the public sector, on the other hand, is creating high costs of public employees and dauntingly large unfunded liabilities for employees in most local, state and federal governments. Taxpayers and people in future generations are thereby being committed to pay for rapidly growing liabilities. We really must find more intelligent ways of controlling the size, cost and effectiveness of government entities. Pension reform, in particular, should be undertaken in the near future. Too many of the outcomes in the battle for special advantages are contrary to the greater good, so a sensible redesign of our entire system should be achieved!

If we don't want unions to have power, the least we can do is make a legislative increase in minimum wages. Due to the effects of inflation, the purchasing power of the minimum wage is about the same today as it was in 1960, and lower than it was between then and the early 1980s.

Earlier Instances of Supreme Court Folly

The Supreme Court has gone through prior periods where its biases were so contrary to common sense that things were ruled "Constitutional" that were actually extremely unfair and even contrary to many of the ideals and principles upon which our nation was founded. The dreadful Dred Scott decision is the most famous of such rulings. This 1857 decision held that people of African descent brought into the United States and held as slaves were NOT protected by the Constitution and could never be citizens of the United States!

The ruling even stated that their descendants, whether or not they were slaves, had no more rights than they did. It also held that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in federal territories. And the Court ruled that

because slaves were not citizens, they could not sue in court, and that slaves were 'chattel' or private property, so they could not be taken away from their owners or freed without due process. Wrong, Bob!

A terrible Civil War was fought over this and related issues. According to Supreme Court Justices in 1857, the authors of the Constitution had viewed all blacks as "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." What blatant bias!

The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted in 1868 to finally rectify this egregious racist wrong. The bias against black people has a sad echo today in the way lesbians and gay men are regarded by the religious right and their minions in politics and the military and the judiciary. Social conservatives in Congress, and in state and federal courts, must yield to understandings that are fairer, no matter what their personal prejudices. They should act to prevent discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation. This would be consistent with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that sensibly prohibits employment discrimination against people on account of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

Ironically, despite the fact that the Fourteenth Amendment was enacted just after the Civil War to secure rights for former slaves, its important clauses relating to Due Process and Equal Protection have been subsequently interpreted by the Supreme Court as providing a guarantee to corporations of rights that are equal to those of individuals. This oddly perverse skewing of law has expanded the power and immunity of corporations, enabling them to increase their potential to abuse power by harming people and damaging the environmental commons. This point is powerfully portrayed in the aforementioned startlingly insightful book *The Corporation - The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, and also in the fascinating Canadian film, *The Corporation*, which is based on the book. Check them out for entertaining and valuable understandings!

Any contention that corporations can and should regulate themselves seems to me to have been resoundingly refuted by the deregulatory experiment of the decade preceding the financial crisis of 2008, during which banking speculation was encouraged and no steps were taken to prevent risky mortgage lending or the deceptive packaging of mortgage-backed securities or the unsound ratings of these securities by ratings agencies. The resultant credit market freeze caused economies worldwide to falter. These things cost people around the world many trillions of dollars. This is another form of "disaster capitalism" shock doctrines that have wrought severe hardship upon millions of people. We are now called upon to manage our societies more sensibly and more responsibly, and to create smarter controls of banks and other big financial institutions.

Another Landmark Supreme Court Decision, and the Beginning of Environmental Law

Another way to more comprehensively understand Thomas Paine's visionary common sense about "embracing and confederating" all competing interests is to give close consideration to one of the first great legal decisions that halted environmental despoliation in the United States.

Hark back, for a moment, to the Gold Rush that Mark Twain wrote about in *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* and other stories. Gold had been discovered in the South Fork of the American River in California's Central Valley in January 1848. Before the ensuing Gold Rush, there were less than 20,000 non-Indian people in California. An estimated 90,000 people arrived in 1849, and perhaps 300,000 had come by 1855. It is estimated that miners extracted \$12 billion dollars of gold in the first five years of the Gold Rush, at today's equivalent prices. That is a lot of money for a bunch of wild frontier 'pan handlers'!

After much of the gold in rivers had been extracted by panning and placer mining techniques, miners discovered that they could also find gold in hillsides that contained gravels deposited by ancient rivers. Miners developed hydraulic mining techniques in which river water was channeled into miles-long flumes and then into high-pressure hoses, and then it was blasted against hillsides from iron nozzles called 'monitors'. This process resulted in large quantities of gravel and silt being washed down into large sluices where the gold could be captured.

Extremely negative downstream impacts were a serious unintended consequence of this mining method. Enormous volumes of sediments were washed into rivers and carried down into California's Central Valley, resulting in significant harms. Rivers flooded, causing damages to farmland and crops and homes, and the waterways became so

choked with silt that ships could no longer navigate upstream to Sacramento from San Francisco Bay. The scars of these activities are still starkly visible in such places as Malakoff Diggins, California's largest hydraulic mine.

This damaging type of mining had its heyday in California from 1853 to 1884. The conflict of interests between hydraulic mining and people who lived downstream resulted in intense legal battles. The conflict was finally resolved in an epic environmental ruling by Judge Lorenzo Sawyer in the U.S. District Court in San Francisco in 1884, when the Judge issued a sweeping injunction to immediately halt all hydraulic mining activities in northern California's Gold Country.

Today, mountaintop coal mining and large industrial pig and cattle farms are creating similarly vast quantities of damaging wastes. The corporations involved in these activities are required to make efforts to prevent the wastes they generate from getting into rivers and the water table, but they often fail. Sometimes the Environmental Protection Agency levies fines for infractions, but this doesn't usually happen. Why not? Because highly compensated corporate lawyers are shrewdly able to get their employers off the hook, and Big Money corrupts our representatives and the laws they enact, allowing amoral corporations to continue evading their responsibilities as adequately good citizens.

A long view reveals that there are harmful impacts of many industrial activities, and that these negative effects take place not only literally and figuratively downstream in location, but also downstream in time. This is another reason that, when we are formulating priorities and public policies, the well-being of our descendants in future generations should always be taken into account.

Corporate Intransigence

As noted repeatedly in this manifesto, giant corporations are eager to externalize costs upon society. Pollution costs, resource depletion costs, waste disposal costs, greenhouse gas emission costs, climate change costs, worker healthcare costs, bailout costs, a diminishing proportion of the national tax burden, anything they can get away with. By using the power of their deep pockets to manipulate our economic and political system, corporations generally get what they want. They have even been able to get a narrow majority of ideologically biased conservative judges appointed to the Supreme Court to advance their parochial causes!

Vested interest groups tend to oppose footholds for innovative competitors. Big oil companies often staggeringly work against things like renewable resource initiatives and energy efficiency measures, and the conservation of resources and sane climate action. Established interests generally oppose regulations, no matter how reasonable, as well as protections of local communities and the environment, and balanced budgets, international justice and investments in alleviating poverty.

The Supreme Court has injected a virulent new impetus into our national politics that will further obstruct adaptive change and progress toward the well-being of individuals and all of humanity. Politicians are finding that it can be political suicide to honorably support common good plans like Wall Street regulation, sensible gun laws, healthcare reform, moves toward renewable energy regimes, increases in taxes on the highest levels of income and capital gains, and limits to the power of the military-industrial complex in our political system.

At a time when the urgency and importance is greater than ever for us to collectively and boldly deal with serious economic, social, military and environmental challenges, the Supreme Court has given strength to the entrenched status quo, and made our representatives even more beholden to those who favor allowing Tragedy of the Commons outcomes. The political will to make fundamental reforms has thus been weakened, especially progressive reforms opposed by wealthy conservatives and powerful corporations. We must find effective ways to change this!

Let's Tame the Size and Power of Corporations!

Ben Bernanke, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, made the stark observation in December 2009: "I want to be very, very clear: too big to fail is one of the biggest problems we face in this country, and we must take action to eliminate too big too fail." Ben Bernanke was talking about the too-big-to-fail phenomenon from the perspective that big banks have become too big and powerful to prevent them from creating serious risks to the entire financial system and the international economy. The trend toward mergers in the banking industry has only increased since the economic crisis of 2008, so banks have become bigger and systemic risks still persist. This

tendency of banks and merging corporate entities to become too big to fail is a crucial concern that requires much more scrupulous attention and focused reform efforts.

Since Trump Republicans seized power, we have been seeing that it is not just 'too big to fail' that causes costly problems, it is executive power used too expansively to be sensibly held accountable by Congress. NOW is the time to address these challenges!

The 2008-2009 Recession bizarrely resulted in an even more distinct consolidation in the banking business. So we have not moved away from "too big to fail", but instead the reins of banking power have been tightened up like a noose around the necks of American citizens. How long will it be before these reins are jerked abruptly, once again?

Early in the career of Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, he was involved in legal battles that had convinced him of a plain truth: concentrated economic power often has highly negative effects on a free society. The concentration of economic power has been increasing ever since the federal government more-or-less gave up on anti-trust prosecutions. Mergers and acquisitions may sound like a good thing when they are approved by regulatory bodies, but they generally are not win-win situations for workers or the public as a whole, and they can often be disastrous to the greater good.

A deregulatory crusade was launched under Ronald Reagan's direction, and it has unsteadily advanced in favor of vested interests ever since. This has caused the concentration of power to increase dramatically. Exxon-Mobil, for instance, made the biggest profits for many years of any business in history, and yet there has been no 'break-up-Standard-Oil' enthusiasm anymore, as there was a century ago when Standard Oil was broken into a number of different companies by Theodore Roosevelt's administration. The trend toward conglomeration and globalization is creating ever bigger potentialities for economic and ecological catastrophes. We ignore this at our own peril, and at the much greater peril of our descendants. Facebook allowing the Trump campaign to propagate numerous ads containing false information in the fall of 2019 is another on-going instance of Big Business acting in ways inimical to fairness and democracy.

Addressing Too Big to Fail

Since our political system is too dominated by vested interests, we are failing to properly address the transcendent challenges of our time. One hundred years ago, corporate conglomerates had grown too big and too powerful to prevent them from indulging in anti-competitive monopoly practices and other highly unfair activities, so President Theodore Roosevelt acted to regulate business actions and to monitor labor relations, and to steer the national economy in a fairer direction. One step he took was to create a Department of Commerce and Labor that had a cabinet-level official in charge.

Roosevelt and his successor William Howard Taft engaged in 'trust-busting' to break up big businesses into smaller, less powerful organizations so that they would be less capable of abusing the power of their size. The biggest offenders in those days were John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil, J.P. Morgan's giant railroad conglomerate, the Northern Securities Company, James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company, and Andrew Carnegie's U.S. Steel. These wealthy "robber barons" were indignantly and adamantly opposed to trust busting, but the government successfully required these huge companies to be split into smaller organizations for the greater good and safety of the American people. Unsurprisingly, we seem today to be incapable of pursuing similar courses of action because conglomerate entities have grown too big and too politically powerful to be adequately controlled, and they have sprawled across the planet like giant organizational octopuses on steroids.

Theodore Roosevelt called for new "Square Deal" policies to curb the abuses of power by corporate entities. His goal was to root out corruption and reduce the exploitation of workers and farmers and consumers. As a part of his Square Deal, Roosevelt farsightedly worked to ensure that resources were conserved and public lands were protected. Today, because corporate conglomerates are much larger and more global in influence, they dominate our economy and largely control our national decision-making. Bureaucratic interests in the government and in public-sector unions also play significant roles, and all these interest groups together are making it nearly

impossible for the American people to implement smart common sense reforms and limit abuses of power -- and to honorably safeguard the future.

The Supreme Court, while it has had a narrow 5-4 majority of conservative Republican-appointed corporate facilitators most of the time since 2006, has been standing on the wrong side of history by helping enshrine corporate power.

One of the more important issues in the November 2016 elections was whether we would go backward with more ideologically extreme partisans on the high court or more forward-looking Justices.

All candidates for the Supreme Court should be men and women of integrity who will honestly stick to their oath of office. "I solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will administer justice without respect to persons, and do equal right to the poor and to the rich, and that I will faithfully and impartially discharge and perform all the duties incumbent upon me as under the Constitution and laws of the United States. So help me God."

Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell have conspired to stack the Supreme Court and federal courts with judges that are excessively ideological and political and partisan -- and amazingly forgiving of moral transgressions of every sort. For this reason alone, we should be motivated to make sure we throw them out of office.

Corporate entities today have become much more multi-national than they were a century ago. They ruthlessly take advantage of workers, violate laws, evade taxes, exploit natural resources, externalize costs onto society, exacerbate Tragedy of the Commons outcomes, and contribute substantially to forcing huge amounts of debt onto our heirs in future generations. As a consequence, too big to fail has taken on new complexities that have even more crucial implications.

In addition to banks being too big to be prevented from creating unacceptably far-reaching risks to the international economy, too big to fail has become a domineering aspect of international corporatism. Corporations have become:

- (1) too powerful to be held responsible and accountable for not acting in ways consistent with greater good goals;
- (2) too influential to be prevented from squandering resources and overly exploiting workers;
- (3) too profit-prepossessed and liability-evading to be allowed to operate in a poorly regulated laissez-faire economic system;
- (4) too amoral and unscrupulous to be allowed to have equal rights of "personhood" with real citizens;
- (5) too influential in the media, thereby causing negative consequences by misusing the tools of mass persuasion and deceptive advertising and distorting propaganda;
- (6) too deep-pocketed to be prevented from using phalanxes of lawyers and accountants to cheat on taxes and further corrupt our political system;
- (7) too narrow in legal purpose to be trustworthy;
- (8) too shrewd to be prevented from preying on children in their efforts to market junk food, thus contributing to a national obesity epidemic, as well as wasting resources in general by promoting mass consumerism;
- (9) too unaccountable to be prevented from rashly contributing to gathering ecological risks like global warming and associated disruptions of global weather, temperature and precipitation patterns;
- (10) too sprawling around the globe to be adequately controlled or kept from abusing laws of individual nations;
- (11) too powerful to be prevented from radically contributing to ever-growing disparities of power and compensation between executive management and all other employees;
- (12) too influential to be kept from contorting the societies in which they operate by making them more unfair, more inegalitarian, and more unjust and giving ever-more perks, privileges and power to the few while imposing austerity on the many; and,

(13) too narrowly focused in empowering the military-industrial complex and a U.S. national security state through excessive secrecy, authoritarian policies, misallocated spending, and the perversion of our national priorities.

Strongly correlated to these dysfunctions is the outcome that public debt in the U.S. and European nations threatens to create another global economic crisis that will likely prove, sooner or later, to be even more wrenching than the 2008 Recession. We should take bold, honest and effective steps to prevent such an eventuality!

On Differing Opinions

Not only are there many distinctly different interests in every society, but there is also a wide spectrum of varying opinions about important matters. It is vital that we have accurate understandings of human nature and economics and the real world in order to formulate the best public policies. Let us honestly examine the nature of some differing theories and worldviews.

Points of view evolve that are founded on certain premises, assumptions and preconceived notions. All of these can be biased to construe evidence in ways that artificially fit the assumptions made. This is particularly true in the case of religious convictions, in which religious authorities channel deep-seated hopes and fears into rigid beliefs in a curiously anthropocentric Supreme Being of one stripe or another. Good God!

Religious fundamentalists thus often deny the most far-reaching understandings ever realized about geology, physics and biology in order to cling to antediluvian explanations of existence that fail to take into account more accurate modern scientific ways of understanding the world in which we live.

In the political arena, trade associations and think tanks develop highly specific theories that center on their own particular self-interested perspectives and agendas. They make concerted efforts to spin all evidence into a somewhat coherent explanation that supports their biases. Rich businessmen fund a growing number of far-right think tanks designed to establish a theoretical basis for their causes. These think tanks lack the checks and balances that keep academic research honest. As a result, they produce highly flawed and biased studies whose principal purpose is to promote policies that favor the business classes that fund them.

Defenders of the status quo abound in powerful organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Petroleum Institute. These entities try to prove that activities causing billions of tons of carbon dioxide to be spewed into the atmosphere every year are not having any adverse effects on the stability of the global climate and the environment. They effectively deny the natural physical laws that cause temperatures in greenhouses to be invariably warmer than outside them. Such propaganda prevents us from collectively taking bold steps to mitigate these harmful impacts.

Financing for such propaganda is provided by large corporations like ExxonMobil, which until recently was the biggest and most profitable corporate conglomerate in world history. Organizations like this keep people from responsibly reducing emissions that are dangerously causing concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to increase every year. Big oil companies, narrowly focused on making bigger profits, strongly oppose efforts to change the 'sweet system' that allows them to pollute habitats, externalize costs onto society, and contribute to disruptions in the global climate.

Another lavishly-funded group of lobbyists supported by big corporations is the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which works to ram far-right legislation through state legislatures. The organization is responsible for some of the most extreme laws passed in the last decade, "model legislation" that included "Stand Your Ground" gun laws, racially discriminatory and overly strict voter photo ID laws, rollbacks of environmental protections, and efforts to block the Affordable Care Act at the state level, among others. Right now, ALEC is getting ready for the 2020 legislative sessions in the states -- and eyeing even more extreme legislation in states across the country, like stifling the right of people to peacefully protest, and promoting a dangerous Article V Constitutional Convention, and making it easier than ever to pollute the environmental commons.

These are not good things for the well-being of individuals, or for the prospects of people in future generations. This is why we need to find better ways to limit the power of such organizations. We also should seek better ways to ensure that our market system functions more effectively so that the common good is promoted and people are

prevented from being subjected to enormous systemic risks such as costly destabilizing economic slumps and ecological calamities.

Boom and bust cycles of business are an integral aspect of the process of "creative destruction" in capitalism that facilitates big profits in good times, and then provides a socially disastrous shock that suddenly resets over-leveraged positions and "irrational exuberance" in speculative risk-taking. One result of an economic recession is a downward push on wages and a spike in joblessness. This reduction in wage costs allows a recovery that then sets the stage for a new burst of economic growth and profit-making. This tendency toward economic instability is a salient characteristic of unfettered capitalism, and it is among the most harmful of its traits.

Status Summary and Recommendations

The social contract between workers and corporations that was a foundation of the post-World War II economic boom and the growth of the middle class has frayed badly under the onslaught of regressive tax changes, deregulation, and union-busting that began with Ronald Reagan's presidency and were amplified by George W. Bush and other Republicans.

For his part, Donald Trump has waged an all-out divide-to-conquer assault on the social contract with his antagonism to unions and collective bargaining, and his damaging and costly trade tariffs, and his chaotic governance by tweet, and his odd favoritism of some and vindictive emotional madness toward others.

The Republican Party was severely chastised in the 2008 national elections because of the colossal failure of the Bush administration to manage the economy either fairly or well. One of the most egregious aspects of this failure was an excessive preoccupation with tax cuts for rich people and giant corporations while government spending was simultaneously being recklessly increased. The resulting budget deficits, the largest in history until that time, have contributed to large and fiscally irresponsible increases in the national debt.

By the time George W. Bush's eight years in power came to an end, the economy was in a disastrous state. A severe crisis was unfolding that required unprecedented interventions in financial markets to prevent an even more severe credit crisis and the possibility of another Great Depression. Trillions of dollars were advanced by the government and the Federal Reserve to keep banks, insurance companies, mortgage companies and automobile companies from going out of business.

"Disaster capitalism" had once again worked its black magic and forced our nation to bail banks and other entities like AIG, Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae. American taxpayers and workers and future generations are being fleeced even more than before, and short-term expediencies rule the day.

The consequences of these measures were federal budget deficits for the first five years of the Obama administration that exceeded the worst shortfall of the Bush years. The U.S. has effectively painted itself into a risky corner with deficit spending and a ballooning national debt. The bad combination of these shortsighted gambits with bubble economic policies, speculative leveraging, inadequate regulation of the financial system, and a political system that is practically incapable of sensibly dealing with these challenges, makes the American people unnecessarily vulnerable.

Republicans desperately want to always wield controlling power in Congress and occupy the presidency because they want to reap more of the benefits for themselves and their wealthy supporters that majority power provides. In the year before the 2016 elections, I wrote: "They rail about taxes and oppose all Democratic initiatives to reform the corrupted system. They are like sharks circling the American people, smelling blood in the water, and becoming ever more frenzied in preparation for attack. They are committed to grabbing and maintaining power by suppressing the vote, gerrymandering, propagating often preposterous propaganda, and using dirty political strategies like the ones Karl Rove employed. And they just love using divisive tactics. It would be far better if we found ways to unite people to fairly solve problems, rather than dividing them and causing downright harmful results."

I hopefully continue: "It would be foolish to give more power to those who were most responsible for creating the Great Recession and economic hard times, and to thus effectively endorse their anti-egalitarian and fiscally unsound tax and de-regulation policies and their slavish obeisance to entrenched corporate interests, CEOs, fat

cats, Big Oil, giant drug and health insurance companies, the gun lobby and the military-industrial complex. Our system should be fixed instead of just having the people perversely rush from one hoped-for savior to another in the expectation that one of them, one of these days, will actually succeed in making positive changes for the greater good of the people."

Republicans seem to me to be the ones most staunchly opposed to actually fairly solving any of our society's problems. They oppose restructuring our system to make it fairer to small businesses and the bottom 99% of Americans, and they have been striving to obstruct all efforts to make government and corporations work in ways that are more truly consistent with the common good.

The Republican Party spent the eight Obama years filling the role of being "the party of no". It opposed practically every initiative proposed by Democrats, even those things they had previously advocated. They worked actively to try to make President Obama's efforts to improve our nation fail. This is a reason Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal once declared, "We've got to stop being the stupid party."

Republicans used the filibuster in the Senate during Barack Obama's time in office more than twice as much as any other Congress ever in history. Hundreds of bills that had been passed by one house of Congress were bottled up in the other by this obstructionist tactic. The abuse of this procedural tool has made Congress more dysfunctional than ever.

The American political system allows perverse tactics like the one used by Republican Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama, who placed 'blanket holds' on more than 70 nominations of qualified people to positions that would help make the government work more effectively. Senator Shelby adopted this strategy as a kind of blackmail to get more earmarks spending for his district. Pork!

Republicans claim to be "populists", but their agenda seems to be: 'Damn the American people!' While it's true that politicians on both the left and the right claim to be populists, these political charades are generally performed to gain political support from small factions, and then once elected, conservative politicians often morph into a caricature of a fair-minded representative who votes in lockstep with the interests of elite segments of society, not ordinary people.

This crony capitalism is insane! Populism really should be about the best interests of the people, not the best interests of elites. Congress is ineffective in actually solving the challenges that collectively face us largely because of the stubborn refusal by Republicans and Democrats alike to work together for the greater good. The Supreme Court has now thrown great gobs of bait to the sharks with its campaign finance rulings, and these apex predators are engaged in a feeding frenzy. We must change this!

A century ago, a true Populist advocate and political activist named Mary Elizabeth Lease worked assiduously to get the right for women to vote. She once stated that big business had made the people of America into "wage slaves". She declared, "Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street." Now, to believe any different today seems to me to be a form of absurd self-deception, especially in light of colossal bank bailouts and tax breaks like the outrageously generous "carried interest" provision that allows Wall Street fat cats to pay exceptionally low rates on huge profits. Year after year after year.

A surge in right wing populism has also been taking place in Europe in the past decade, rattling established political parties. This movement is hostile to immigrants and austerity measures and the European Union. This movement is like a European Tea Party movement to the extent that it is "a grassroots insurgency fired by resentment against a political class that many Europeans see as out of touch." The main difference between it and its American Tea Party counterpart is that in Europe the backlash is against the European Union, and it is in favor of strengthening the autonomy of national governments; in the U.S., the backlash is against the national government itself. The Trump electoral coup has exploited these perfect circumstances for a demagogue to seize power and then profit and betray the public trust.

A Parable about the Malaise Aboard Our Ship of State

Alarm bells are going off in the control tower of our ship of state. Occasional shudders are shaking the ship's framework, making the first class passengers uneasy even though they are in the middle of a lavish and rather intoxicated multi-course dinner in the posh first class dining room. Communications systems on our ship of state are malfunctioning, and reports are being received from the engine room deep in the vessel's bowels that are chaotically garbled. Key indicators on the instrument panels are flashing red, yet no one can agree on exactly what the problem may be.

A growing discomfiture of the second-class passengers threatens to cause panic, and rumbles of desperation are being heard from the third class passengers on the decks far below. Many experts have been advancing unsettling theories about the course ahead, but a vocal minority has a monopoly on the ship-to-shore communications systems, and they are staunchly denying the contentions of experts who say serious problems underlie the grumbling from below. Food and water shortages in the nether regions of the third class steerage quarters have begun to stir anger and resentment, and even the first class passengers are becoming aware of the growing danger.

Clear-eyed advocates of a new system of more fairly sharing the well-stocked provisions of the first-class larders are being loudly renounced by the rich passengers and law-and-order ideologues who self-righteously and jealously defend the privileges of the people in first class. These apologists for the status quo are charging that anyone who advocates for remedial changes aboard the ship is a dangerous and wild-eyed socialist, or treasonous foreigner, or godless communist. Rumors are beginning to circulate that some of the ship's officers belong to a group that fervently believes the Captain of the Titanic was a brave hero for having steamed full-speed ahead through the waters of the north Atlantic despite sightings of huge icebergs that are largely submerged as they float in the treacherous seas.

Entertainment spectacles are being beamed aboard the ship continuously to distract the passengers from the growing tensions. Fox News is negatively being broadcast incessantly in the main lounge. Intensely competitive sports spectacles are frequently interrupted by insidiously persuasive commercial messages that encourage every person to obey their material instincts by indulging in the consumption of all manner of products and the use of a wide variety of services. Men in tuxedos and top hats have a monopoly on giant amplified megaphones that they are using to urge passengers to be calm and not rock the boat. These eminences claim that the current captain in 2019 is competent, though on the last watch they worked assiduously to undermine the prior captain's ability to cope with all the problems that are beginning to afflict everyone aboard.

Half the people on the ship are poorly paid crew members, and they are being worked mercilessly to perform often menial tasks. They are being distracted from their personal woes by glowing electronic devices and shiny trinkets and pervasive propaganda and large signs proclaiming God-ordained commandments. A stunning number of the passengers have already been confined to long-term detention in the brig for extensive number of various offenses, even though the resources devoted to this imprisonment are placing excessive demands on the ship's supplies. A proper Captain would find better ways to run his ship!

An Interim Conclusion

I respect the insightful words of Paul Hawken, who wrote in his provocative book, *The Ecology of Commerce*: "We have the capacity and ability to create a remarkably different economy, one that can restore ecosystems and protect the environment, while bringing forth innovation, prosperity, meaningful work, and true security."

It is high time that we begin to come together to do this -- citizens, CEOs, Senators, Representatives, unions, judges, religious leaders and all -- to make sure we manage our societies more fairly and in a manner more likely to prove sustainable.

History will likely confirm my conviction that, to make America safer, stronger, fairer and more prosperous, we will need to restructure our economic policies so that intelligently designed incentives influence people's behaviors. This is the best way to make our world a better place. Join with me in supporting the ideas of the Earth Manifesto to help effect positive change!

Thanks for your consideration of these thoughts.

Truly yours,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain

Hannibal, Missouri

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