



## The True State of the Union

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Every January the President of the United States delivers a generally upbeat assessment of the State of the Union to Congress and the American people, one sprinkled with idealism, political spin, rosy rhetoric, shameless boasting, deceptive partial truths and some Big Lies, along with rationales for a proposed agenda. But make no mistake about it, the true State of the Union differs markedly from this spin and propaganda, which is crafted by the president and speechwriters, strategists and lawyers.

The true state of the union is, in a word, DIVIDED -- intentionally divided -- and it is only because *We the People* have been so antagonistically pitted against each other that ruling elites have been able to create extreme levels of inequality and wreak widespread injustices and concentrate wealth and power excessively narrowly in the hands of the few. We could easily build an improved democracy that works better for all of us, not just the wealthy few, and we should start by seeing clearly how master manipulators responsible for this retrograde state of affairs have rigged the economic system and indulged in highly unfair, regressive and oppressive social engineering.

The USA has just suffered its longest government shutdown in its more than 242-year-long history. The shutdown cast a bright light on how merciless the dominating forces have been in crushing the middle class and poor people. Many government workers became desperate at not being paid for more than a month, and this is part of a much bigger issue. Some 78% of all U.S. workers are living from paycheck to paycheck, according to a report by Forbes Magazine, and 75% of workers are in debt. One out of every six Americans experiences food insecurity, and most minimum wage workers need to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The average working person is unable to financially cope with an injury, emergency or turn of bad luck, and 40% of Americans would not be able to cover an unexpected \$400 expense, according to a report from the Federal Reserve Board.

This is a sensational contrast to more unified times like those of the 1950s when a household headed by just one breadwinner could afford to buy a house, two cars, groceries, schooling, medical insurance and other necessities. How did this negative change come about? Our corrupt system of corporate "vulture capitalism" has clearly been responsible, with corporate CEOs and politicians having worked hard to maximize private profits by exploiting working people, using up natural resources, drastically reducing the ability of employees to bargain collectively for a better deal, socializing costs and risks, encouraging speculative risk-taking, and corrupting politics by rudely engaging in a "cost shifting" uber-scam whereby taxes are radically slashed on profits made through these schemes, and these profits are monopolized by the top dogs, and the economy is rigged in ways that drive up costs for basic necessities, especially including housing, schools and child care. This has made the vast majority of Americans worse off.

Our government has become a corporatocratic oligarchic plutocracy -- rule by the wealthy few and ruthless profit-maximizing corporate entities. The American people are being severely afflicted by greed-driven capitalists engaging in tragically skewed national priorities, a harsh middle class squeeze, treacherous anti-egalitarian political intrigue, economic malfeasance, financial fraud, fiscal irresponsibility and rashly unsustainable ecological insanity.

The real responsibility of the President is to represent the true national interest, not just the narrow interests of rich people and a fooled and manipulated political base. Abraham Lincoln famously declared that a house divided

against itself cannot stand, and we are all seeing that the processes involved in our nation falling apart due to hyped up conflicts can be exceedingly ugly. With polarized divisions reigning from sea to shining sea right now, progress toward a fairer, more just and more secure union is being paralyzed.

Mark Twain once famously observed that we have the best government money can buy. Will Rogers, known as Oklahoma's Favorite Son, was a famous humorist, vaudeville performer, film star and newspaper columnist, and an astute social commentator who cleverly expressed a contrapuntal idea: "It's a good thing we don't get all the government we pay for." ... "If Stupidity got us into this mess, then why can't it get us out?"

Republicans are emulating the Captain of the Titanic by ordering full speed ahead in dangerous waters with their blockheaded refusals to take action to reduce the severity and frequency of extreme weather events being caused by emissions of huge volumes of climate-disrupting greenhouse gases. Instead of responsibly demonstrating good stewardship of the resources and ecosystems of our home planet, Trump Republicans are treating the Earth like a business in liquidation, ruthlessly converting natural resources into cash as quickly as possible and funneling a maximum amount of the resulting profits into the pockets of a small minority of the most financially fortunate people. And they are treating the American people like pawns in a merciless game of Monopoly, in which they cheat to gain unfair advantages and exacerbate environmental and social injustices for personal gain.

This is a part of a worldwide anti-democratic wealth-monopolizing scheme that has allowed rich people to get richer while poor people get poorer. Just last year alone, billionaires got 12 percent richer while the nearly four billion people who make up the world's poorest half saw their wealth decline by 11 percent -- according to an Oxfam report published to coincide with the start of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 20, 2019. "This is not inevitable, this is unacceptable," said Winnie Byanyima, the Executive Director of Oxfam International. The report indicated that the number of billionaires has almost doubled since the financial crisis a decade ago, "yet tax rates on the wealthy and corporations have fallen to their lowest levels in decades." Byanyima, a leader on women's rights, democratic governance and peace building, added that economic elites like those in Davos have the power to help end extreme inequality, but that they irresponsibly have chosen not to take steps to make this happen. Let's come together on common ground to demand they make things better, not worse.

Former McKinsey consultant Anand Giridharadas has turned against the Davos elites, recently writing a book titled *Winners Take All*. He argues that the people who attend this conference are hypocrites who bear some responsibility for problems ailing the world today. "You enabled the nationalism that threatens our societies. You stiffed so many of us. You fought for rules that let you steal the future from our children. You pushed for monopolies and austerity and deregulation. People got angry, and some of them voted for hell. And who benefited? You again. Because instead of following their anger up to the summit where you gather, the enraged were goaded, sometimes by your fellow plutocrats, into punching downward and turning on the most vulnerable."

Another aspect of this global scheme by rich people is that governments worldwide are running up huge amounts of debt. The United States and emerging countries have pushed the total global debt to a record high \$66 trillion, as measured in U.S. currency. This riskily opprobrious debt burden is roughly twice as much as it was in 2007, when the financial crisis was beginning to unfold, according to Fitch Ratings' new *Global Government Debt Chart Book*.

When we honestly consider the legacy we are leaving to posterity, we should remember the words of Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*: "As we are running the next generation into debt, we ought to do the work of it, otherwise we use them meanly and pitifully. In order to discover the line of our duty rightly, we should take our children in our hand, and fix our station a few years farther into life; that eminence will present a prospect, which a few present fears and prejudices conceal from our sight."

Billionaire Boston investor Seth Klarman sounded an alarm about rising debt and related growing social tensions, and the pathetic absence of American leadership, in his highly anticipated annual letter to clients. Klarman was not at the economic summit in Davos, but in a report in the *New York Times* it was revealed that his 22-page letter was "being passed around" at the gathering. "It can't be business as usual amid constant protests, riots, shutdowns and escalating social tensions," Klarman writes. "As the post-World War II international order continued to erode, the markets ignored the longer-term implications of a more isolated America, a world increasingly adrift and global leadership up for grabs. ... There is no way to know how much debt is too much, but America will inevitably reach an

inflection point whereupon a suddenly more skeptical debt market will refuse to continue to lend to us at rates we can afford. By the time such a crisis hits, it will likely be too late to get our house in order."

Broader perspectives should be welcomed. Economists, when they are being cautious and honest, point out that it is unwise and improvident to borrow heavily from future generations for misguided purposes. They know that it is folly to promote priorities that are too short-term oriented because such courses of action will leave a disastrous legacy for our descendants. Ecological philosophers and environmentalists advise that long-term impacts should be taken into account in all assessments of courses of action that businesses and governments are considering. They also provide us with cautionary tales regarding the damaging impacts of activities like the depletion of fisheries and the clear-cutting of forests, and they warn us about the "threat multiplier" of global warming-stoked climate change and the increasing costs and risks associated with recklessly profligate uses of fossil fuels and fresh water and other natural resources. They tell us that there is an overarching need for a transformation in our societies to make them sustainable, and that big steps to be taken SOON. And they remind us of the risks of failing to courageously address the causes and consequences of population overshoot.

Our current leaders do not inspire trust or respect for their myopic spin when they are brazenly dishonest or engage in distracting ruses, distorting propaganda, unscrupulous political overreach and imprudence in fostering activities that are resulting in ecological overshoot. See *Climate Change Considerations, Carrying Capacity, and Ecological Overshoot* for a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of related issues.

Republican politicians are demonstrating a severe degree of rash irresponsibility by stimulating the use of fossil fuels, failing to take action to prevent climate change, aggressively exploiting working people and resources, helping giant corporations foist cost-externalizing schemes onto the public, driving up the national debt to further enrich the rich, manipulatively inspiring fear to divide and control people, perpetrating social injustices, abusing power by imposing austerity measures on the masses, propagating woefully unethical and deceitful lies and misinformation, stoking the insecurity of the majority of the people, undermining women's rights and prerogatives, discriminating against millions of people in racial and ethnic minorities, treating poor people with an extreme deficiency of empathy and compassion, giving far-right extremists stupidly excessive influence, threatening peaceful coexistence both at home and abroad, engaging in way too much economic risk-taking, promoting materialistic consumerism, waging a very cruel, counterproductive and costly war on cannabis, egregiously wreaking extensive harms on people worldwide, and generally sacrificing the greater good. This constellation of treacherous undertakings compounds their basic sins of mindlessly damaging the environment, promoting policies that decimate wildlife, and refusing to address the underlying human causes of millions of species of life being driven toward eternal extinction.

The way capitalists have managed to crush the American Dream hopes and prospects of the majority of the people is through political corruption, and the vulturish swamp master Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell may be more responsible than anyone else. He revealed himself to be an arrogantly unrepentant villain in supporting the government shutdown debacle, and he has acted as a Trojan horse for crony capitalists, allowing them to seize control of our national politics and decision making. He has been diabolically opposed to fairer political representation, expanded voting rights and getting Big Money out of the driver's seat of American politics with honest campaign finance reform. Together with Republican efforts to create extremely partisan gerrymandered congressional districts in dozens of states, Congress has been able to get away with imposing anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic and anti-environmental policies on the people. Mitch McConnell can accurately be regarded as "the gravedigger of American democracy", according to a Holocaust historian, and he has been instrumental in enabling malfeasance and demagoguery-facilitated abuses of power by Donald Trump and his corrupt cronies. Ditch Mitch!

Trump and obsequiously loyal Republicans in Congress have been aided and abetted by dishonest facilitators on Fox News who are pushing the propaganda that says illegal immigration is a national emergency. They have been crying wolf so zealously and disingenuously that it comes as a stunning surprise that illegal immigration today is near the lowest level in 50 years. Conservative propagandists have repetitively claimed that there is "border emergency" to justify this shutdown of the federal government, but this is merely xenophobic white nationalist spin by Donald Trump, Stephen Miller, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and their ilk. "The number of apprehensions at the southern border declined 75% in the past two decades -- from 1.6 million in 2000 to 397,000 last year", according to conservative columnist Max Boot. "The number of undocumented immigrants in the United States is

at a 15-year low. Immigrants, both legal and illegal, commit fewer crimes than the native-born. And there has never been a terrorist attack in the U.S. carried out by terrorists who entered the United States from Mexico."

The shutdown impasse took place due to a preposterously stubborn refusal by Trump Republicans to face the fact that their despotic dominion-demanding One Party rule is crashing into the reality that the United States is a democracy guided by a great living Constitution and rules of law, and that they cannot continue to govern without reasonably cooperating with the party that represents the majority of the people. This shutdown mercilessly made pawns of millions of Americans in a cynical ploy by authoritarians engaging in moral turpitude.

### A Big Picture Overview

Twelve score and two years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. The American colonists declared independence from Great Britain in 1776 to secure "unalienable rights" that included life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Recognizing that "governments are instituted among men" to secure these rights, and understanding that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, representatives of the people came together in 1787 to create a Constitution to guide the new nation.

These Founders were striving to create a more perfect union by protecting the people from despotism and ensuring a reasonable modicum of fairness and justice for all. They declared their intention to promote the general welfare, insure domestic tranquility, defend the national security, make people secure from external dangers, sensibly limit federal government power, and secure the blessings of liberty to all the people and every citizen to be born in posterity. To help achieve these goals, our representatives should always strive to provide fairness of education, opportunity and legal justice, and demonstrate intelligent foresight, clear vision and commendable courage in creating public policies that are consistent with these principles and ideas that contribute to the common good.

In the years since our ancestors declared independence from Great Britain on July 4, 1776, extensive economic, social, scientific, technological, demographic and environmental changes have taken place. Progressive legislation has been enacted to abolish slavery, constrain monopoly practices, reduce abuses of working people, guarantee civil rights, improve workplace safety, protect consumers, limit unfair competition, establish an adequately civilized social safety net, ensure more expansive rights for women and gay people and those in racial minorities, and protect public lands and the environmental commons from despoliation.

Today, humanity is being confronted with challenges that are increasingly global in nature. These problems pose more significant risks than ever before in the history of civilization. Our human activities are threatening the world with climatic instability, worsening heat waves, cold snaps, terrible wildfires, rising sea levels, a heightened vulnerability to man-made and natural disasters, widespread refugee crises, devastating conflicts, overpopulation, inexorably greater demands on the planet's finite resources, compromised ecosystems and diminished biodiversity.

One main cause of these increasingly dangerous risks is stimulated consumerism and wasteful production and consumption. Arrogant greed and excessive aggression and the continued rapid growth in the number of human beings on Earth are also contributing factors. These forces put humanity on a collision course with the limits of the carrying capacity of the Earth to support us. Rainforests and temperate forests are being clear-cut, and wetlands, fisheries, coral reefs and wildlife habitats are being destroyed, and we are even adversely altering the alkaline balance of Earth's oceans and the gaseous composition of the atmosphere. And simultaneously, streams and lakes and seas are being polluted, and aquifers, topsoil, minerals and supplies of fossil fuels are being wastefully depleted worldwide, causing an accelerating deterioration of basic life support systems. This is making it increasingly important for us to immediately begin enacting measures to protect ecosystems, conserve resources and improve family planning programs and the education, empowerment and well-being of women.

Pope Francis articulated a farsighted vision and philosophy, early in his papacy, in a controversial encyclical on climate change and poverty. In this document, the Pope blamed "unbridled capitalism" for ruining the Earth, and he bemoaned the tragic effects this is having in particular on the poorest people. Reforms are needed now!

Let's be honest with ourselves, and *See Clearly*. There are more than 7.7 billion people on our home planet today, and it is projected that human numbers will reach 8 billion within 5 years. All the most consequential challenges we

face today will be made much worse by this overwhelming human tide. Resources will be rashly depleted, fresh water supplies will become scarcer, pollution will get worse and greenhouse gas emissions will cause ever more extreme weather events like the powerful hurricanes, torrential rains and destructive wildfires that afflicted locales around the globe in 2017 and 2018. And storm surge flooding will become more harmful as sea levels rise.

Ambrose Bierce defined politics as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles." The intense political strife we are experiencing today is, on the surface, a titanic struggle for the hearts and minds of men and women. It is an ugly struggle, in essence, between forces that seek to give the powerful and the privileged ever-greater influence and benefits, and opposing forces that instead champion greater fairness and advocate wise and far-sighted planning to protect the public and safeguard assets and prevent ecological catastrophe, and limit abuses of power inherent in inadequately regulated capitalism and domineering rule by hyper-partisan politicians.

With humanity engaged in a vast uncontrolled experiment in casino capitalism, stimulative debt-financed tax cutting, the stoking of inequality and an increased concentration of wealth in the hands of a power-abusing few, it is unfortunate that the federal government has abdicated its critical obligation to address big problems. By giving increasingly unleashed power to corporations, "conservatives" have abandoned fair-minded governance in favor of the detrimental influence of Big Business over the fates of working people. This facilitates lousy management of natural resources, and irresponsibly fails to protect people and the biosphere from predations and damages.

The wise Solon was a great statesman, skilled negotiator and consensus-seeking lawmaker who is known as "the father of democracy". He was chosen back in ancient Athens more than 2,500 years ago to take far-reaching actions to save the republic from revolutionary strife, which was stalking Greece at the time because elite factions were abusing their power and jealously preparing to defend their excessive privileges through force.

The rebuke of one-party rule by voters in the 2018 elections is consequentially contributing to the exposure of the depth of the culture of corruption that Republicans have allowed to fester in Washington D.C. and all around the land of the free. Investigations are ramping up into the conspiracy involved in Trump Republicans having grabbed power in 2016, and into their many attempts to cover up what they did. Investigations will also shed more light on the Trump family's violations of the Emoluments clause of the U.S. Constitution, and on illegal uses of the Trump charitable foundation and the Trump inaugural fund. In addition, malfeasance in many federal agencies will be scrutinized, especially in the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior, the Treasury Department, the Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security. It is time for new federal government management that is much more honest and responsible!

Let's enthusiastically give congratulations to the record number of women who won political office in the 2018 midterm elections! This was an achievement long overdue. While many women were successful in their election contests, many more like Stacey Abrams in Georgia were cheated out of power by the GOP political machine. Women have been broadly kept out of power in our sexist patriarchal republic ever since it began. This unjust disenfranchisement of the best interests of females has enabled discrimination against women in compensation and benefits, made them less secure, reinforced an exceedingly hard-to-break glass ceiling, allowed sexual harassment and violations against both the dignity and safety of females, and ignored many episodes of domestic violence, in addition to fostering discrimination based on race and harshly depriving women of reproductive choices and rights. Women of the world, unite! Men, give us greater respect.

### Illumination

Keep in mind that accurately understanding the big picture context of the current state of our union is valuable for shedding illumination on our best courses of action. Let's strive to see beyond the barrage of distractions and misinformation and distortions of reality that politicians are deluging us with, for it is clear that vested interests are working overtime to hide comprehensive versions of the truth -- and to torpedo prospects for broadly fairer solutions to problems.

Capitalists and speculators screwed up the economy so badly during the Roaring Twenties and early 1930s that the world suffered the worst global depression in all of human history. To fix the extraordinary inequities this created, a New Deal was instituted in the 1930s to give the public greater protections from the predations of Big

Business, and to give working people a moderately better degree of security, and to dramatically improve the social safety net for those left behind, forgotten, by ruling forces.

By the 1980s, wealthy people and bankers and corporate management had finally become real tired of the New Deal generosity toward poor people and the lazy masses, and "the whole fairness bullshit", so they installed the B-movie actor Ronald Reagan as a puppet to do their bidding. After he had milked the lucrative vein of their lavish financial support to get elected, he famously declared, "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Reagan then proceeded to cut taxes on the highest level of incomes from 70% to 28%, and told the Big Lie that this great solution would sure-as-shootin' trickle down to benefit the many, just you wait and see. We're still waiting! -- and the swindle has caused the national debt to dangerously spike from less than \$1 trillion in 1980 to \$22 trillion today.

Reagan had exploited the fact that the U.S. economy suffered a period of recession and stagflation during the late 1970s and the early 1980's, and he promoted the ideological spin that less taxes and fewer regulations were the solution to the economic "crisis". He basically contended big government was bad from an economic standpoint. The wily politician knew exactly what control-freak dominion-demanding elite groups wanted to have done, so he acted like a perfect pawn of his puppet masters, and declared he would fix the problem, and proceeded to brazenly rig the system more radically to the advantage of the few, to the detriment of the many. The few included Wall Street bankers, the Savings-and-Loan industry, speculators, rich people, CEOs and giant corporations, especially those involved in the coal, oil, natural gas and petrochemical industries, the pharmaceutical drug industry, and gun and munitions manufacturers and others engaged in the highly profitable military-industrial complex.

Fast forward to December 2017, and Trump Republicans foisted an outrageous new swindle on the American people by authorizing \$1.5 trillion to be borrowed, burdening the public, to give the lion's share of the spoils to the top 1% of taxpayers. They gave relative crumbs to the poorest 50% of Americans, and promised that this form of debt financing would stimulate the economy and create jobs, and would surely be the best way to benefit everyone.

Republicans have not only slashed taxes on corporations, but have also given them many expanded privileges and perks, including allowing them to pollute the air and water and to foist huge costs onto the public through cost externalizing gambits. They have also given corporate entities access to public lands to make big profits on our natural resources. This misguided rule makes it appear that the REAL problem in the USA today is corrupted bad management in government and inadequately regulated corporations. This perspective gives credence to the characterization by firebrand Sarah Kendzior of the Trump administration as "a transnational crime syndicate masquerading as government." Vladimir Putin is pleased to head this global Party of public graft and vice.

We see that institutionalized corruption is stalking the land of the free, and rich people are using some of their huge tax cut windfalls to further promote their system-corrupting agenda. As always in matters like this, we should "follow the money." The Koch network of really rich conservatives announced at one of their secretive conclaves in the California desert just 9 months before the 2018 midterm elections that they would spend \$400 million to influence election outcomes and national policies, up from \$250 million they spent in the 2016 elections. This is incorrigible corruption incarnate. (See Postscript for an update on the Koch donors' activities in late January 2019).

While Republican politicians are doing a great job of representing the interests of rich people and crony capitalists and the military-industrial complex, they are doing a lousy job of representing the best interests of the people. Edward R. Stettinius, the U.S. Secretary of State in 1945, once stated, "The battle for peace must be fought on two fronts. The first front is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second front is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace."

Today, "conservative" doctrine basically says that we should spend unlimited amounts of money on the military and aggressive dominance to make us secure. This ignores the mutual security needs of the vast majority of Americans and peoples in other countries, and it also posits that we should advance America's economic supremacy while being stingy in spending for social programs and in sustainable development programs and humanitarian aid at home and

abroad. We should understand that all people are in this existence together on planet Earth, and doctrines that myopically proclaim we can and should go it alone are foolish and unacceptable as official policy.

Crony capitalists are corrupting the fundamental principles of our democracy. The pursuit of wealth has become distorted into a self-serving agenda aimed at continually increasing the prerogatives of the rich and powerful. Political philosophies advocating enormous amounts of spending on weapons and military domination capitalize on people's fomented fears, ethnocentric self-righteousness and nationalistic patriotism to advance rash goals. The book *Addicted to War, Why the U.S. Can't Kick Militarism* provides insightful revelations into good reasons we should alter this perverse priority now by adopting more just policies. The best policies require a principled balance between freedom and equality, between inadequately regulated capitalism and protections of the public.

Not only are the Founding Principles of our nation being eroded, but so is the sensible system of checks and balances established by our Constitution. We must stand up and oppose these trends. We cannot, in particular, allow the increasingly intrusive Executive Branch to stack the judiciary with more political partisans like Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh. We need honesty, integrity, discipline and vision in order to establish sensible controls, equitable fairness, and accountability for responsible policy making in the White House and Congress.

We must begin to act more responsibly towards the majority of Americans, and towards people in the future. We must use reason, not blind faith in doctrine, deregulation and privatization. We should strive to make the world a better place by making fairness of opportunity a top goal of our society. We should emphasize decentralized power and the health of our communities, and fight poverty and injustice, and strive to build cooperative consensus and mutual security and peaceful coexistence, and conserve energy and protect a healthy environment. We should be open to a progressive adaptation to change, moving forward, not backwards.

Our leaders have the duty to help create a truly healthier and fairer society. Since politicians tend to pander to the already privileged, we need to establish more effective institutions to prevent such unfair outcomes. Our goal must be to encourage a maximum of personal freedoms for all people to pursue fulfillment, within the context of a secure, wholesome structure of fair and just laws and institutions. Fairer representation required!

Our one-party system under Trump Republicans from 2017 to 2019 has pushed retrogressive priorities after having gained power by illegitimate means. The federal government is becoming more authoritarian and unjust due to the success of distorting propaganda, institutionalized corruption, sexist policies, capitalistic exploitation, aggressive militarism, and deceptive rhetoric, fake news and right-wing influence in mass media. This is not good.

Capitalism is powerfully opposed to efforts to regulate it. It resists efforts to make its operations fairer, more socially responsible, more accountable, and more ecologically sound. It frequently demonstrates disdain for social justice and environmental sanity, and even democracy itself, due to its single-minded focus on profits over all other values. One reason for this is that capitalism and democracy are fundamentally antagonistic to each other in many ways, just as freedom and equality basically involve struggles against each other. The greater the unrestricted freedom a society allows, the more that inequalities naturally multiply -- and the rich get richer.

Democracy essentially stands for fairness, equal representation and government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Deregulated capitalism, in contrast, strives for monopoly, maximized profits at the expense of workers, special tax privileges and dominating power, control and special deals for a small elite. Giant corporate entities wrongly treat the natural world, upon which humanity is completely dependent, as if it were unlimited and expendable, with little concern for the harmful consequences. They do not demonstrate adequate care for working people, communities, the environment or a sustainable future, and they strive to gain short-term advantages and capitalize on opportunities to get special subsidies. They lobby to gain the prerogative to externalize costs of pollution and related healthcare onto society. Corporations act almost exclusively in ways that, in an individual, would be regarded as psychopathic. Joel Bakan makes this point clear in his insightful book *The Corporation - The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* -- and in the thought-provoking film is based on it, *The Corporation*.

One form of legalized corruption is the phenomenon known as regulatory capture, which is bad for society. This is the state of affairs where powerful vested interests and their lobbyists succeed in getting what they want for themselves at the expense of the greater public interest. When regulatory agencies have been captured by big

corporations, they insidiously circumvent common good plans and distort our national priorities. Regulatory capture operates in ways similar to the *Tragedy of the Commons* phenomenon, in which individuals or groups with high-stakes interests in regulatory decisions or policy outcomes focus their energies and resources to gain outcomes narrowly favorable to them, while members of the public have a weaker and less-focused individual stake in the outcome, so are much less influential in trying to prevent the schemes. When intently-focused entities devote their energies to particular policies by capturing agencies whose purpose is to sensibly regulate them, it almost always undermines the greater good. One glaring instance of this was the failure of regulatory agencies like the Federal Reserve and the SEC to prevent the hyper-costly financial meltdown of late 2008.

But after the Republican electoral coup took place on November 8, 2016, regulatory capture was exacerbated by a profoundly irresponsible takeover of the government itself, and of the management of regulatory agencies, by authority-abusing operatives who act as puppets of profit-prepossessed corporate deregulatory zealots. This development is proving to be harshly detrimental to the people, and Trojan horse agency heads have been put in charge that are sabotaging the missions and guiding purposes of the government agencies directly from within.

The risk in this state of affairs is that it undermines fairness principles, the public health, financial stability and ecological integrity. Irrationally exuberant investors and speculators want a piece of the inside action, so the boom-and-bust cycle will speed up, and a debt crisis or other fiscal calamity looms. The last financial crisis and recession, notably, was an *Inside Job*, as made clear by Charles Ferguson in the film by that name, and in his brilliant exposé, *Predator Nation: Corporate Criminals, Political Corruption, and the Hijacking of America*.

There are a thousand things that government should deal with, and they should be sensibly prioritized. Shamefully, the top two Republican priorities since January 2017 have been: first, to eviscerate the Affordable Care Act, causing millions of disadvantaged Americans to lose medical coverage in order to eliminate a small tax on the investment income of wealthy people. Recognizing that gender inequities are among the harshest of all injustices in our patriarchal society, we should heed the perceptive understandings of Martin Luther King, Jr., who once famously declared that injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane of all forms of inequality. Injustices related to basic health care, pre-existing medical conditions and reproductive rights are particularly opprobrious to women, and they are just one aspect of a multitude of gender inequities, including many being exposed by aggrieved women through the #MeToo movement.

The second top Republican priority has been to give big tax breaks that overwhelmingly benefit those who don't need them, irresponsibly financed by borrowing huge amounts of money from every taxpayer in the future. Having already run up the national debt from less than \$1 trillion in 1981, when Ronald Reagan signed on to Arthur Laffer's ideological Big Lie trickle-down tax-cutting "supply side" economic theory, to \$22 trillion, we should chuckle derisively, but know well how consequentially this contributes to increased risk and adversity.

The vicissitudes of fate are fickle, so it is hubristic folly for the fortunate few to foist a Tough Luck political system onto the populace. It is unethical to forsake the vast majority of the masses to rashly give rich people ever-larger shares of the spoils of capitalist systems. Knowing that negative circumstances can befall anyone at any time, and that both accidents and diseases can afflict any person at any age, the only rational national plan for healthcare is one that provides medical care for everyone at an affordable price. Since it is simply true that, of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane, it is crazy to coddle profiteers and speculators by playing politics with health insurance, medical care, drug prices and lethal issues like opioid addiction and racially unjust mass incarceration. Comprehensive solutions need to be devised that holistically address the root causes of such problems.

During the frenzied Republican push to double down on their regressive taxation schemes by hurrying up tax cuts while they were still able, one fact got swept under the carpet. Even before the Republican idea of giving another generous dose of "comforting the comfortable by afflicting the afflicted," the national debt was projected by the Congressional Budget Office to increase by another \$10 trillion in the next 10 years. This is unconscionably fiscally irresponsible! "NOT ONE MORE PENNY" in tax cuts to the wealthiest 1% would have been a much better starting proposition for fair-minded tax reform. The smart investor Warren Buffett called the recklessly short-

term-oriented Republican tax scam the "Relief for the Rich Act." It is scandalous that this legislation was enabled by deeply corrupt politics and deceit, and through wrongheaded abuses of power.

It is a colossal folly to build a financial house of cards on a shaky foundation of excessive amounts of borrowed money. Debt financing of investments in future well-being are much smarter -- "good debt" -- but bad debt that is incurred to finance profit-maximizing, resource-squandering, inequality-stoking, tax-cutting priorities is really imprudent and fiscally irresponsible.

"The state of the union is hopeful, resilient and enduring," declared Rep. Joe Kennedy of Massachusetts in his passionate response to Donald Trump's 2018 State of the Union address. Those qualities of American character are inspiring, and are increasingly necessary in light of assaults by Republicans on unity, fairness, equality, the truth, the general welfare, women's rights, domestic tranquility and the prospects for sustainable existence.

When Ronald Reagan ran for office in 1980, he painted a dark picture of a troubled nation, and he offered a message of redemption. He called on Americans to work together to solve their problems, and said, "I ask you not simply to 'Trust me', but to trust your values -- our values -- and to hold me responsible for living up to them." When Donald Trump mounted the stage during his campaign for president, he similarly told America that the nation is in crisis, that "attacks on police and terrorism threaten the American way of life, that the United States suffers from domestic disaster and international humiliation. That it is full of shuttered factories and crushed communities. That it is beset by 'poverty and violence at home' and 'war and destruction abroad.'" He even asked black people, brazenly, "What do you have to lose?"

Then, in glaring contrast to Ronald Reagan's nod to values, the Master-Manipulator-in-Chief offered his solution. "I am your voice", he said. "I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order." He did not mention liberty or justice or inclusiveness or the ramifications of increasing inequality. He did not appeal to prayer, or to God. He did not ask Americans to measure him against their values, or to hold him responsible for living up to them. He didn't ask for their help. He asked them to place faith in him. "Believe me, I'm trustworthy!", he basically boasted, despite many blazing warning signs from throughout his life that it has always been folly to trust him.

The truth of the matter, it turns out, is that Trump Republicans are the perfect force for rigging the economic system ever more to the advantage of rich people and corporate entities, and against the common good and the best interests of people in future generations. After a long 24 months in office, the results are clear. The fix is in. To succeed in this gambit, Donald Trump and swindling politicians emulated the tactics of many demagogues throughout history by hijacking people's emotions, demonizing and scapegoating immigrants and asylum seekers, manipulatively deceiving people, exploiting popular prejudices, stoking fears, bearing false witness, promoting false claims, divisively using inflammatory rhetoric, and generally making arguments based on emotion rather than reason. They did this to distract people from their scandalous activities with a constant barrage of outrageous tweets and stands on issues. They personally attacked and threatened opponents in order to zealously impose their twisted domineering control drives over the populace. They are doing this in greedily self-centered and blatantly self-serving ways that betray the common good. Emotional intelligence whisperers tell us that civilized behaviors involve impulse control, not unleashing the worse devils of our instincts by succumbing to temptations to take unfair advantage of others, irrespective of how damaging the consequences will be.

Back in 2011, the then Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney smugly declared, "Corporations are people, my friend". I thought, "Oh, is that so?" Well, let's call in the political economists, sociologists and historians, and psychologists and psychiatrists, and let's analyze exactly what kind of person the preponderance of giant corporations resemble in their actions these days. Conveniently, the insightful professor Joel Bakan has already done clear-eyed research for us on this topic, and he had an American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* handy by his side. Corporations, he concluded, if regarded as people, would be seen as pathological sociopathic psychopaths, due to their typical behaviors and inherent tendencies. He cited convincing instances in which they act in ways that are manipulative, socially irresponsible and unempathetic, and they seem to be almost incapable of guilt, remorse, moral rectitude or genuine responsibility for the greater good.

Joel Bakan emphasized the fact that big corporations are basically designed to socialize costs onto the public, declaring 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." Corporations should not be given the full rights in courts of law that are constitutionally assured to real people, for too many abuses of power have wrongly been made using rationalizations like the one that says the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees corporate entities the same rights of Due Process and Equal Protection as individuals. Lawyers assemble! Honest representatives?

Again, follow the money! Corporate profits are near all-time record highs right now, and yet corporations pay only 9% of all federal tax revenue. This fact reveals a measure of the corrupt abuses of power by corporate entities, for there has been a drastic decline from 33% in 1950 of the portion of federal taxes paid by corporations. In effect, corporations have managed to get the taxes they pay reduced by more than 72%. Shareholders are getting bigger cuts of profits made by exploiting working people and using up Earth's natural resources, and damaging Earth's ecosystems and altering the global climate.

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

--- Mark Twain

Senator Kamala Harris expresses the opinion that "When people of all ages, colors, religions and backgrounds come together, unified in our collective struggle for justice, there is nothing we cannot accomplish." Let's do it! We should make smart and fair-minded investments in broadly shared current and future well-being -- in the common good, social justice, public education, vital physical infrastructure, and a sustainable future. Instead of investing in sustainable well-being, however, scheming "conservatives" are sacrificing the common good to goose profits by allowing natural resources to be excessively exploited and letting businesses externalize costs onto the public, while at the same time broadly disempowering working people and eviscerating protective regulations, and recklessly pushing their agenda that primarily favors millionaires and billionaires.

True patriotic Americans in our democracy are loyal to the Founding principles of our country, NOT to the officeholders who are currently in control of the government. It is especially foolish to support officeholders when they are abusing their authority. As Mark Twain purportedly observed, possibly apocryphally, "Patriotism is supporting your country all the time, and your government when it deserves it."

Several prominent national security experts have stated that Trump represents "a clear and present danger to the national security of the United States." Citing Donald Trump's demonstration of an "unbelievable acquiescence to Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, that was positively shocking to those of us who've worked in national security all of our lives" and "all the many things that you've read about in the charging documents of people associated with the president, all those point to a reasonable inference, that, and it's a painful anguishing thing to acknowledge ... that the President of the United States a clear and present danger to the national security .."

"The Framers were concerned that a president could abuse his authority in ways that would undermine the democratic process and that could not wait to be addressed. So they created a mechanism for considering whether a president is subverting the rule of law or pursuing his own self-interest at the expense of the general welfare -- in short, whether his continued tenure in office poses a threat to the republic. This mechanism is impeachment. Trump's actions during his first two years in office clearly meet, and exceed, the criteria to trigger this fail-safe." Let's impeach both Trump and Pence, recognizing the brilliance of the observation made by Alexis de Tocqueville long ago, "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults." The time has come to strengthen our democracy!

Republicans in Congress are being obsequiously deferential to the narcissistic Egomaniac-in-Chief, to such an unprincipled degree that they are broadly betraying their country. It is ironic, hypocritical and morally wrong for representatives of the people to be loyal to this bullying demagogic abuser of authority, because the right thing to do as a public servant is to fulfill the oaths of office and to be loyal to the Constitution, rules of law and ethics, and the greater good of the people. Republican politicians and enablers are taking increasingly desperate stands to protect their illegitimate and excessively harsh rule against common sense judgments that call them to account for their insidious efforts to wrongly rig our system and engage in improper and unethical actions, fiduciary irresponsibility, fraudulent indulgences and downright criminality. Mitch McConnell stands with Trump, both guilty.

The system is broadly corrupt even without this far-reaching malfeasance. An honest understanding of how an economic system is rigged gives us the best basis for deciding how to re-design it to be fairer, healthier, saner and more sustainable. In matters of economics and tax issues, Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist David Cay Johnston is one of the foremost authorities. So it is a very good bet that insights into the misguided provisions and perverse incentives contained in the 2017 Republican Tax Cut folly can be understood by recognizing how our tax system really works, and his 2003 book explains this with clarity. Together, let's peruse *Perfectly Legal: The Covert Campaign to Rig Our Tax System to Benefit the Super Rich - and Cheat Everybody Else*.

Fareed Zakaria made this interesting point: "The Republican Party has many good people and good ideas. But none of them matters while it houses and feeds fantasies, conspiracies and paranoia, tinged with racism, bigotry and anti-Semitism. Republicans are now squarely the party of McCarthy, and until that cancer is excised, they should not be entrusted with power."

#### A Focus on the Downsides of the Current Culture of Corruption in Washington D.C.

Lord Acton, a member of the British Parliament in the late 1800s, once famously wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". The Founders of our great but faltering American experiment in democratic governance understood this basic political truth: this is why they created a Constitution containing effective checks and balances to prevent corruption, despotism, demagogic abuses of power, self-dealing by politicians, and taxation without fair representation. Ever since the Constitution was ratified, there has been a broadly progressive evolution of laws, rights and protections that have helped make our democratic republic roughly more providential in assuring the majority of people a fair modicum of liberty, justice and reasonable cause for being able to share in the American Dream of opportunity, equal treatment and fair dealings under the law.

The truth in Lord Acton's words are about to be revealed anew by the bright light of subpoena power that the new majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives will now exert to fulfill the responsibility given to them in the Constitution to wield oversight over the Executive Branch and federal agencies. They will set the legislative agenda and hold investigative hearings. This means the American people are about to see many more details of the corrupt activities, malfeasance, and conspiratorial cover-ups that Republican politicians have been scandalously engaged in while exerting domineering One Party power in the executive and legislative branches of government for the past two years. And when Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation reveals its findings about how Trump Republicans and Russians conspired together to help give domineering power to honesty-deficient, unprincipled and corporate-kowtowing Republican politicians, then the depth of illegitimacy and wrongdoing will become clearer, and a crisis of reckoning will engulf our public sphere. Check out *See Clearly - Sanity During Insane Times: Book Twelve of the Earth Manifesto* online for outstanding ideas and plans for how to sensibly deal with this!

Pope Francis notably condemned the "evil" of fake news in a first document by a Pope on the subject. "Fake news is a sign of intolerant and hypersensitive attitudes, and leads only to the spread of arrogance and hatred. That is the end result of untruth", he wrote. Pulitzer Prize-winning Michiko Kakutani's new book *The Death of Truth* explores this phenomenon in the age of Trump, and makes it sure seem like this is premeditated murder.

The phrase 'fake news' has been co-opted and its meaning has been perverted by the Deceiver-in-Chief, and now it is being used by authoritarian leaders around the world. According to the late Republican Senator John McCain, authoritarians are using the term "to silence reporters, undermine political opponents, stave off media scrutiny and mislead citizens", and to undermine the free press to "make it more difficult to hold governments accountable." McCain also stated that constant cries of a distorted sense of reality characterized as "fake news" are undercutting legitimate reporting to "strip activists of one of their most powerful tools of dissent."

Senator Jeff Flake delivered a landmark speech on the Senate floor to underscore the deleterious effects of Donald Trump's "sustained attack on the truth." The Arizona Republican began by quoting Daniel Patrick Moynihan's line that "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." Flake quoted several despots -- from Bashar Assad to Rodrigo Duterte and Nicolas Maduro -- who have used the words "fake news" to dismiss reports about their abuses of human rights since Trump took office. Flake also invoked George Orwell, who said: "The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it." Jeff Flake deemed it "shameful" for Trump to use the term fake news and call the free press "the enemy of the people", and called Trump's

repeated attacks on the media "repulsive". He declared that he "has it precisely backward," pointing out that despotism is the real enemy of the people, not a free press, for reporters and journalists are generally an enemy of despots and a guardian of democratic fair-mindedness. Jeff Flake also said that when Trump calls news stories he doesn't like "fake news", he is generally the one who "should be the figure of suspicion, not the press."

With Donald Trump hating criticism so much that he characterizes the free press as "an enemy of the people", he is echoing the chilling phrase and tactics employed by the ruthless Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Fittingly, and in a curious parallel, Stalin was the subject of a pervasive socialist personality cult, while the Cunnig-Celebrity-in-Chief is the subject of a denialist cult of die-hard fundamentalist supporters. These enablers seem to gullibly believe that the relative crumbs given to poor people and middle class folks by provisions in the Republican Tax Cut plan prove that conservative politicians care about the Forgotten Man, despite austerity measures being imposed, and despite the fact that their relatively paltry tax breaks pale in comparison to the huge sums of money given to millionaires and billionaires, like the extra \$100 million each, or so, on average, that the wealthiest 5,000 families in the USA are forecast to receive annually. Even worse, it's ominous that this tax cut swindle is being financed by borrowing more money and piling it onto an increasingly risky gargantuan level of national debt.

The Rand Corporation, a nonpartisan think tank, characterizes this issue as an epidemic of "truth decay" that is characterized by increasing disagreement about basic facts, a blurring of the line between fact and opinion, an increase in the relative volume of opinion over fact, and declining trust in previously respected sources of information. The result of "truth decay" is that policy debates hinge more on anecdotal experiences and less on objective facts. This makes it next to impossible to find good solutions to big problems like immigration and anthropogenic climate change, because leaders cannot even agree on the nature of a problem.

The uncompromising domination of *We the People* by "conservatives" is not only profoundly unjust, but also exceedingly illegitimate. Since political legitimacy in a democracy is determined by the consent of the people, it is outrageous how illegitimate the litany of ways were that Republican politicians used to win their 2016 election campaigns, for they broadly violated basic principles of informed consent. Rather than earning people's votes by making honest commitments to improve conditions for the majority of the people, these politicians gained big advantages by pandering to wealthy donors, and by gerrymandering congressional districts and suppressing the vote of millions of people, so that conservatives can gain an undeserved and undesirable over-representation.

Adding insult to injury, Trump Republicans have made treacherous use of social media by micro-targeting people on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, using ads that provoke people's anger and spreading deceitful fake news and slanderous character assassinations. They exploited people's emotions through these dastardly demagogic tactics, acting in deeply dishonest ways, propagating devious ideological propaganda and taking shrewd advantage of anti-immigrant, anti-choice, anti-gay and anti-gun-regulation sentiments. In other words, they are still using "God, guns and gays" strategies to divide people to gain and maintain power, like they did during the presidency of George W. Bush. And they continue to give more and more perks and power to rich people and capitalists by undermining the power of working people, and by pursuing fiscally irresponsible scams of running up the national debt to finance tax cuts mainly beneficial to their rich donors. And they refuse to rein in the corrupting influence of Big Money and corporations.

An integral aspect of the success of conservatives in seizing domineering control in the USA can be traced to another immoral and illegitimate tactic: the Republican Southern Strategy, which unscrupulously capitalized on racial biases, especially in states of the South, to gain support and get elected. Then they invariably betray their supporters by championing economic policies that are primarily focused on giving the lion's share of benefits to the already wealthy. Economist Paul Krugman has written about this cynical bargain with the devil that Republicans have made "to exploit racism to advance a right-wing economic agenda. Talk about welfare queens driving Cadillacs, then slash income taxes. Do Willie Horton, then undermine antitrust. Tout your law-and-order credentials, then block health care." Krugman elaborates: "The cynical bargain that has been the basis of Republican strategy since Reagan has now turned into a moral trap. And as far as we can tell, no elected Republican -- not one -- has the strength of character to even attempt an escape." Come on, Ben Sasse!

All in all, these nefariously negative abuses of power are an outrage against government of the people, by the people and for the people. These cunning activities are disgraceful because they have been used divisively, with the merciless intention of winning the Presidency and gaining majorities in Congress. Then, after having stolen power through these dishonorable and unethical methods, they have broadly abused it to advance a radical anti-environmental, anti-egalitarian, fiscally irresponsible, oppressively discriminatory far right agenda.

In another view with regard to legitimacy, consider this. While 63 million people voted for Donald Trump, some 74 million Americans voted for NOT TRUMP. Hillary Clinton got almost 3 million more votes than Trump, and more than 8 million people cast their votes for Libertarian Gary Johnson or Green Party candidate Jill Stein or Independent Evan McMullin or a write-in candidate. What this means is that Republicans DO NOT have a mandate to impose a far right agenda on the people, so their uncompromising rule is an insult to the nation. It is notable that less than 60% of the estimated 250 million Americans who are eligible to vote actually cast a ballot in 2016, and about 75 million Americans are under the age of 18, so they are not old enough to vote. It is certain that the best interests of non-voters and young people are really poorly represented by the Republican agenda.

Most of our leaders speak idealistically of democracy, freedom, liberty, justice and peace, but conservatives are mainly focused in actuality on forcefully pursuing policies designed to give them more power, domination, short-term profits, and unimpeded access to natural resources, markets and cheap labor.

In conclusion, our leaders are misleading us, and they are also leading us in the wrong direction. Their actions are frequently dishonest, hypocritical and uncompassionate, and far too often contradictory of their rhetoric. They almost invariably choose to side with Big Business and those with Big Money, rather than the best interests of the people, the environment and life on Earth. They are being socially, politically, fiscally and ecologically irresponsible in their pandering to unbridled capitalism, anti-democratic unfairness, deregulated polluters, spendthrift consumerism, born-again religious fundamentalism, politically-expedient deficit financing, shortsighted exploitation of public lands, aggressive militarism and American geopolitical dominance at any cost.

We should strive to develop more enlightened attitudes towards job creation, the success of small businesses, employment policies, living wages, trade deficits, women's rights, family planning, civil rights, universal health insurance, stem cell research, the war on drugs and dignity in dying. We each make choices every day, and we must begin to understand the consequences of the choices we make, and start positively modifying our choices. We must demand that our leaders lead us more fairly and wisely and honestly. We are at a juncture in human history where we need to reassess our purposes with clarity, optimism and better reasons for hope. We need to cultivate the ability to better recognize what is best for us, for our societies, and for future generations.

Many peoples in prehistoric cultures showed reverence for their ancestors, like the Rapanui on Easter Island who carved monolithic volcanic stone sculptures to commemorate their courageous forbearers, in honor of their having paddled huge wooden catamarans across uncharted waters to the remote reaches of the South Pacific. Unless we begin acting more responsibly, our descendants will look back with deep dismay toward today's era of materialistic consumerism and kowtowing to those who despoil our home planet, and to the mindlessly wasteful squandering of natural resources and our myopic shredding of the fabric of the web of life on Earth. The bottom line is that we must believe that we can make a positive difference in the world -- and know that it is vital and necessary for us to strive to make such a consequential difference!

Truly,  
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"Tiffany Twain is the illegitimate great-granddaughter of the estimable and irreverent writer, lecturer, humorist and philosopher Mark Twain." She has published *Twelve Books of the Earth Manifesto* as a save-the-world treatise containing wide-ranging and far-sighted observations that deal with all the biggest issues facing humankind here in the second decade of the 21st century. Check it out online!

"Dr. Tiffany B. Twain, the author of this manifesto, writes with optimism and a cheerfully bemused but vigilantly concerned tone. She provides scathing insights into the unjust and foolish aspects of human societies all around the world. She professes to be a wise Depth Assessor, and an indirect descendant of the famous author and humorist Samuel Langhorne Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain. She asserts that what the world needs now is a deeper connection to ancient human roots, and a greater clarity of perspective, and a more respectful appreciation of the natural world."

I, Dr. Tiffany B. Twain, feel fortunate that I seem to have inherited my great, great grandmother Jane Clemens' "sunshiny disposition". From my great grandfather Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain, I inherited an incisive philosophical bent, and it is sad that political philosophy has so rudely come to dominate so much of our every moment's thinking, and is prepossessing people's minds and sucking too much oxygen out of the echo chamber bubble in which we find ourselves, because this prevents us from seeing holistically and clearly.

Crib sheet: My mother was Nina Clemens Gabilowitsch. Her mother was Clara Clemens, Mark Twain's oldest daughter. Clara's mother was Mark Twain's wife Livy (Olivia Langdon Clemens). And Livy's mother was Jane Clemens, who was noted for her sunshiny disposition. As the ancient Romans may have said, "Anche se non è vero, fa una buona storia." (Even if it isn't true, it makes a good story.)

### Postscript, January 30, 2019

It is noteworthy that the Koch conclave of billionaire donors began to "rebrand itself as kinder, gentler and less political" at their January 2019 meeting in Indian Wells in the Southern California desert. The 634 wealthy donors in attendance have all committed to give at least \$100,000 every year to push their goals. At this year's posh event, they emphasized the consequential contributions they have made to recent reforms of the U.S. criminal justice system, and to their support of efforts to improve public education, help disadvantaged people, support research on overcoming intolerance and find common ground on some issues.

They are laudably trying to demonstrate a greater modicum of empathy and concern for the vast majority of Americans, because they are aware of how successful they have been in their efforts to create an economically and politically unjust society that is extraordinarily beneficial to themselves at the expense of the vast majority of Americans. They see that their success is severely damaging our democracy, harmfully tearing our national unity asunder, preventing climate action that would help forestall catastrophic impacts of extreme weather events and rising sea levels on billions of people, and destroying the fabric of life on Earth.

But make no mistake about it, really rich people in the donor class are still acting as puppeteers in manipulating conservative politicians to do their bidding to get their taxes cut and regulations eliminated, and to prevent reforms of campaign financing, allow corporate lobbyists to continue to have undue influence on our national policies and priorities, and stack federal courts with right-wing judges who are predisposed to decide issues in their favor against the common good.

By showing a degree of magnanimity, these fine rich folks are really just buying some token insurance policies against revolutionary strife that could dethrone them from their positions of domineering power and control. Their efforts to improve our system of public education, for instance, are skewed toward reinforcing libertarian ideologies and cementing in place the power and privileges of elite individuals.

Many progressives are dubious and skeptical of the Koch rebranding effort. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island wrote: "I'm not convinced by the Koch network's new charm offensive; has nor should your readers be.

Until we know how much the Kochs, and the 634 other mega-donors who joined them, are spending on dark-money campaigns to block action on climate change, undermine public unions, confirm obedient judges, and cut their own taxes by billions of dollars, we should view their latest PR effort as more obfuscation. ... If Charles Koch's top goal is 'uniting with people across the whole spectrum,' he should unite them around honest facts and science, not deceitful campaigns funded by dark money."

King Louis XVI was the last King of France before the monarchy was overthrown during the French Revolution, and if he had adopted "a kinder and gentler" image and some more fair-minded policies, and acted honestly to prevent the national debt from reaching such opprobrious levels, he and Marie Antoinette might have saved themselves

from having had their heads lopped off by the guillotine. So the Koch billionaire donors are sensibly demonstrating a modicum of progressive fair-mindedness to save their own necks from the unfolding strife caused by the staunch refusal of really rich conservatives to support populist reforms like tax policies that significantly reduce the risky rising disparities in wealth and well-being between the Few and the Many.