

## **Paine's "Common Sense"**

A few months before our forebears created our Declaration of Independence in 1776, Thomas Paine published "Common Sense," a pamphlet arguing that independence from Great Britain was the only logical course for the Thirteen Colonies. America was at a crossroads: rebel against a superior power, and have war, or submit to continued British rule, and have peace.

The issue was momentous, but Paine did not rant. He did not spew political slogans and patriotic clichés. He did not presume to say what "the American people think" or what "the American people want." He began a reasoned, political discussion. At a critical time in our nation's history, Paine gave the people something big to think about, and discuss. And they did.

I believe we are at another critical time in our nation's history, and I offer the following for the same purposes.



**T**hese are times that try my soul.

The clamor of partisan politics is nonstop. Catch phrases rule the day – “job killer,” “class warfare,” “wing nuts,” “flip-flop,” “Obamacare,” “tax-and-spend,” “millionaires and billionaires,” “failed presidency.”

Blathering politicians parry questions, so they can mouth some silly slogan — “turn the country around,” “get back on the right track.”

They do not talk about how difficult it is to make changes in a big country with the world’s biggest economy. And a divided government. The 435 voting members of our House of Representatives number more than the populations of thousands of small towns in America. The arcane rules and customs of the U.S. Senate enable a willful minority (and even a single senator) to frustrate the majority. Getting the Congress to agree on anything can be as hard (and as rancorous) as getting a small town to agree on putting up a traffic light.

No, our politicians follow the precept: “Keep it simple, Stupid!” (K.I.S.S.) We get easy answers. Government by slogan. Patriotic clichés. Except for an abundance of American flags and confiding voice-overs, their TV ads could just as well be selling soap. Our politicians tell us what “the American people think” and what “the American people want.”

Are we such dolts? Should we believe that a member of Congress from a district in the Heart of Dixie like Eric Cantor knows what “the American people” think? Should we believe that a senator from a state with less than one-half of one percent of the nation’s population like Mike Enzi of Wyoming knows what “the American people” want?

Consider this: we, “the American people,” are some 312 million young and old, smart and dumb, healthy and sick, rich and poor, educated and not, native born and not. We



are just about every race and mixture of races imaginable. Some of us are ambitious, some lazy, some creative, some hopeful, some discouraged, some nutty, some disabled, and some lead lives guided mainly by strong religious beliefs. In short, “the American people” comprise the most diverse nation in the world, and each of us wants government to represent our best interests, and usually without our doing much to help make it happen.

### **So, who represents me?**

I own two guns. I hunt and fish. I am old enough so that I can no longer buy AARP’s Level Term Life Insurance. I live independently on my retirement income (Social Security and a small annuity) and personal savings. My car is twelve years old. My home is in a small, conservative town that votes Republican as regularly as night follows day. Almost all the elected officials who represent me at every level of government are Republicans, and conservative Republicans at that. Much of the time, I do not feel represented.

I try to be fair and balanced, but I usually vote for Democrats. That said, I was glad when Congressman Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois, a Democrat, went to jail for his corrupt practices in our House of Representatives. I was glad when Congressman James Wright of Texas, a Democrat, had to resign as Speaker of the House and resign his seat for his corrupt practices. Likewise, I was glad when Republican Newt Gingrich’s many ethical transgressions made his House leadership untenable, and he resigned his position. In short, I do not care whether the offender is Democrat or Republican, those who abuse the power of office should pay a price. Too bad that more of them do not pay the price of going to jail.

I did not always support Democrats. As a teen-ager, I joined the hoopla in 1952 that celebrated the Republican presidential candidacy of Dwight Eisenhower. “Ike” Eisenhower was a war hero, and as a child of World War II, I was much into war heroes. I wore a big “I Like Ike”



button. As part of a civics class in high school, I made the case for electing Eisenhower in a five-minute speech over the public address system. I sneered at the wasteful spending of the Truman administration: federal aid for snake farmers!

Increasingly unpopular, the war in Korea was stalemated then. Peace talks were getting nowhere. America was war-weary. Who better could figure out how to end the bloodshed than war-hero Eisenhower? If elected, he promised to “go to Korea.”

Well, there you have it! Simple enough! “Ike” will “go to Korea” and fix it. Was K.I.S.S. even around then?

Eisenhower won in a landslide, with more than 80% of the electoral vote, and he sure enough went to Korea.

Sorry! The Korean stalemate dragged on for another six months, with some of the most savage battles of the war. Eisenhower actually had little to do with the belligerents finally agreeing to an armistice. That was the beginning of my moving away from hero worship, political slogans, and campaign promises, and towards becoming a more informed citizen.

### **My political awakening**

I was not old enough to vote for Eisenhower, of course, but neither were several of my cousins and high school friends who were being drafted into the military. What? How could that be right? How could they be drafted, sent off to war, and possibly be maimed or even killed, but have no right to vote?

**“They’ll give us a gun, why not a vote?”**

I thought the subject through, and became a strong advocate for lowering the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, the draft age. “They’ll give us a gun, why not a vote?” I asked in an editorial in our high school newspaper.



Nonetheless, America continued to draft eighteen-year-old males who did not have the right to vote. Whether they were Republican or Democrat, conservatives generally opposed lowering the voting age.

Two decades later, with the draft continuing to feed another increasingly unpopular war — this time in Vietnam — massive protests led by college students against the war were seen to threaten domestic security. As a precaution, the National Guard was frequently called out to protect public property. In May 1970, National Guard troops shot and killed four students at Ohio's Kent State University. In reaction, millions of students went on strike. That may have been the turning point for giving young people a say in our government.

Within a year, in what became the quickest action on a constitutional amendment in our nation's history, the Congress passed, and the states ratified, the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution, giving eighteen-year-olds the right to vote. I thought it was a correction long overdue.

### **I get a leg up**

I attended a small, state college with an enrollment of about 800 at the time. The school specialized in training elementary and high school teachers, but I enrolled as a "pre-commerce" student, intending a business career.

I lived on campus in prefabricated barracks that had once housed World War II military personnel getting specialized training. My barracks mates included Korean War veterans earning college degrees through the so-called "G.I. Bill of Rights." They received \$110 a month. Like me, most of them came from small towns and farms within 100-mile radius, and most probably would not have gone to college without the help of the G.I. Bill.

In my case, because of a physical handicap resulting from having polio when I was a little kid, and our family being poor, financial aid came through Wisconsin's federally funded Vocational Rehabilitation Program. I was



eligible for a monthly stipend of about \$95 to help me become a more productive member of society by furthering my education. Several classmates with various handicaps also received “Voc Rehab” help. One had been born blind. The clicking of her Braille stylus in class is an indelible memory. She went on to earn both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. She married, and spent her professional career as a rehabilitation professional.

The “Voc Rehab” program was tiny compared to the G.I. Bill, but both are examples of government assistance that helped Americans like me to make more of our lives than might otherwise have been possible. Indeed, the education and training of almost eight million WW II and Korean War veterans under the G.I. Bill is generally acknowledged to have produced the professional and technical workforce that propelled America towards world leadership in business, technology, medicine, research, and an enviable standard of living.

Because of such examples, I came to believe that our federal government has a vital (and legitimate) role in our educational system, a role generally opposed by conservatives.

**None of the changes I witnessed is more significant than our nation’s transition from rampant racist (and sexist) policies at every level of government, commerce, and housing, to a system of more equal protection under the law**

Over time, I have seen government make important changes to address the needs of our nation — changes that helped to create the kind of place I am proud to call “my country.” Most of these changes were made despite the opposition of so-called conservatives and those special interests usually served by conservatives.

There is no better example than the struggle of American citizens to overcome discrimination based on



race, sex, and religion, etc. It is a long, sad (and bloody) story.

When I was twelve years old, Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota sought to include a plank in the 1948 Democratic platform that called for federal legislation against lynching, legalized school segregation, and job discrimination based on "skin color." Imagine, lynching!

Until then, both political parties had usually included vague generalities in their platforms about the importance of civil rights, but did nothing about assuring them. When the convention adopted Humphrey's plank, southern Democrats stormed out and formed a rump party of "Dixiecrats" to run a candidate who would oppose attempts to end legal segregation and other fixtures of Southern culture, South Carolina's U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond.

Fifteen years later, when I was in my late twenties, the largely Democratic South was still vigorously (and bloody) opposing interference in its "way of life." I have unforgettable remembrances of that time:

- "Bull" Connor turning fire hoses and police dogs on African-Americans marching for their basic rights of citizenship in Birmingham, Alabama (1963).
- Alabama's Governor George Wallace blocking the entrance to the University of Alabama to prevent the registration of two African-American students (1963).
- Ku Klux Klan members planting a bomb that killed four little black girls attending Sunday School exercises in a Birmingham church (1963).
- Discovering the bodies of three, young civil rights workers doing voter registration in Mississippi, murdered by Ku Klux Klan members (1964).

The 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy provided President Lyndon Johnson with an emotional opportunity to push through civil rights legislation advanced by the dead President. Southern senators



launched an unsuccessful 57-day filibuster to kill the bill, but for the first time in the history of such legislation, a coalition of non-Southern Democrats and Republicans voted to break the filibuster. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 finally began the process of ending generations of legal discrimination against minorities, women, and others.

Although the coalition that supported “civil rights” reform was broad, it was the leadership of Democratic Senator Humphrey and Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson who brought this momentous change about. President Johnson did so with the knowledge that it was going to cost his political party the South.

Sure enough, angry at the Democrats’ betrayal on this issue, Senator Strom Thurmond (the “Dixiecrat” candidate for President in 1948), changed his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican.

Thurmond’s action began a general shift in the South. From that time on, the Republican and Democratic parties began realigning themselves. As the South became more and more Republican, southern Republicans became the new core for opposing civil rights reforms affecting voting, housing, employment, wages, education, and myriad other domestic issues.

**“You can see turds floating where we’re supposed to swim”**

In 1966, I ran for the Wisconsin State Senate in a semi-rural northern district, as a Democrat. I was thirty years old, and something of an idealist. I had come back from Peace Corps service three years earlier convinced that my most precious possession was my American citizenship. I had learned that, as an American, I enjoyed privileges and opportunities that no one else on earth enjoyed. Now, in the spirit of President Kennedy’s “New Frontier,” I wanted to help make America still a better place. I had a toddler son, and had begun thinking more long-term. In my campaign literature, I said I wanted to be a “positive voice” for government action in several important areas.



At the time, polluted air and water were destroying America's environment. The toxic scum on Pittsburgh's Cuyahoga River regularly caught fire. Excessive use of DDT and pesticides in American agriculture threatened the very balance of nature. Vast Lake Erie was so contaminated its fish suffocated. In their millions, the longer, wider, heavier American cars of the 1960s with powerful V-8 engines slurped gasoline laced with lead, while getting sixteen miles per gallon. Smog alerts and respiratory problems became regular features in American cities.

Pollution problems were not limited to industrial and urban America. The "city dump" of the small town I grew up in was a convenient bank on the Yellow River. Whatever you wanted to get rid of, you tossed over the edge. Below the slope of smoldering refuse, an oily, greenish smear continuously curled onto the sluggish water.

A young woman saw my senate campaign folder in which I advocated a strong, clean water bill. She telephoned me. "You can see turds floating where we're supposed to swim," she said. I met her at a municipal park that bordered Duncan Creek in Chippewa Falls. Sure enough, there were human feces floating on the water that would join the Chippewa River, and then become part of our great Mississippi River. I imagined a hundred other polluted Wisconsin streams feeding the Mississippi. "We've got to do something about this," she said. "I don't want my kids growing up in this kind of mess." Nor did I.

When state and local efforts to curb such pollution proved ineffectual, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was born. With increasing awareness of how the natural world is inter-connected, our nation's clean air and clean water regulations began to slow, stop, and then reverse the destruction of our natural environment. Hundreds of millions of federal dollars helped municipalities to build or upgrade local water and sewer systems. New regulations stopped the destruction of vital wetlands and the discharge of pollutants into our



waterways. New automobile emission standards and the use of unleaded fuel and the required use of catalytic converters reduced the poisons we pumped into the air. Billions of federal dollars began cleaning up toxic industrial sites all over the country.

At virtually every step, conservative voices objected to such federal action: the regulations were a restraint on free enterprise; compliance would be too expensive, hurt competition, slow growth, cost jobs.

Today, those same conservative voices continue. However, because of government action then and now, we live in a cleaner, healthier America. There is no better example of this renewed America than our national symbol, the American eagle. Once near extinction in “the lower 48” because of our poisoned environment, the American eagle has returned, and is thriving.

### **The “Minimum Wage”**

In my experience, no issue arouses more predictable reactions from conservatives than the minimum wage. The idea of government getting between employers and their workers through the minimum wage is anathema to the idea of a free labor market. “Let the market decide,” they say.

However, if we let the market alone decide, we might have semi-slavery, because there will always be people who, because of limited abilities or family circumstances, can do only low-level work, and must work at low-level jobs for whatever they can earn. Do we expect them to be self-sufficient? Then, we must ensure that they earn enough to be self-sufficient, and pay the price. To me, ensuring that my fellow citizens earn a living wage is an appropriate role for government.

#### **Nigging over paying a “living wage”**

Wisconsin was a pioneer in establishing a minimum wage law in 1911, but it covered only women and minors, who suffered widespread wage exploitation. At 22¢ an



hour, that first minimum wage was thought to be a “living wage.” It soon became subject to niggling adjustments, however. Employing mostly women, the restaurant industry brokered an exception. Instead of paying a full minimum wage, restaurants could pay just 90%, because it was assumed that the worker would earn the other 10% in tips. This 10% exception for tips was later raised to 15%, and then 20%, and then 25%. Today, Wisconsin’s mandated hourly minimum wage for “tipped employees” is \$2.33!

Our nation did not establish a federal minimum wage until 1938, a quarter century after Wisconsin’s pioneer legislation. That first federal minimum wage applied only to workers engaged in interstate commerce, and was just 25¢ an hour. (If Wisconsin’s 1911 “living wage” had kept up with inflation, it would have risen from 11¢ to 31¢ an hour by then.)

The idea of the minimum wage being a “living wage” has long since disappeared from most discussions. According to the academic Peter Dreier, “During [President Ronald] Reagan’s two terms in the White House, the minimum wage was frozen at \$3.35 an hour, while prices rose, thus eroding the standard of living of millions of low-wage workers. The number of people living beneath the federal poverty line rose from 26.1 million in 1979 to 32.7 million in 1988”<sup>1</sup> Although it was not a “living wage,” if the minimum wage of \$3.35 of the Reagan era had kept up with inflation, it would have been \$5.46 when he left office.

With every effort to adjust or expand the minimum wage to make it more of a “living wage,” conservatives raise the same arguments: It’s going to cost jobs! You’re going to put us out of business! Repeated studies of this issue indicate that neither is true.

Today, the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, but individual states are a hodgepodge of exceptions and tweaks. Most of the Deep South does not have state



minimum wage laws, so jobs not covered by the federal program pay less, and in some cases, much less.

At \$7.25 per hour, a full-time worker earns just over \$15,000 a year. From those earnings, the employer deducts almost \$1,150 for the worker's Social Security and Medicare contributions. The remainder — about \$266 a week — is what the worker can spend for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, health care, and all other living expense. Try living on that in a major U.S. city! <sup>2</sup>

**“Get the government off our backs!”**

This famous mantra of President Reagan is a rallying cry for conservatives. Government is the enemy — intrusive, burdensome, oppressive, grasping, wasteful, even diabolical. In my lifetime, I have seen some extreme reactions to government. I remember conservatives saying that putting fluoride in our drinking water as a tooth decay preventative was a Communist plot to poison America. I remember them saying that Communists created and controlled the 1960s civil rights movement. I remember them saying that U.S. membership in the United Nations would lead to World Government. Those views have proved to be nonsense, but how different are they from assertions made today that President Obama is not an American citizen, or a Christian? I can only shake my head that such ignorant prejudice, if not outright hostility, exists among our electorate.

Ironically, so many conservatives seem to be adamantly against government — until they want government to act on their behalf. Agricultural price supports, subsidies for the oil industry, protective tariffs, and “Fair Trade” laws— all are examples of “special interest” legislation that, at least theoretically, should have been vigorously opposed by those who want to “get the government off our backs!” But in these cases and myriad others, those who oppose government in general, readily embrace it to support their own interests.



Or to support their beliefs in how we should lead our lives. Examples are manifold of those who try to impose their values on others by wanting government to:

- Ban the teaching of evolution
- Ban the teaching of sex education
- Ban certain books from our libraries and school curriculums
- Ban certain organizations from college campuses
- Ban the use of non-English in government business
- Ban certain marriages
- Ban or restrict the sale of birth control items
- Ban or restrict abortions

I can imagine no more intrusive or oppressive government than one that would restrict our freedom of inquiry and behavior based on what a vocal group believes is immoral, or bad.

### **Common Sense 1776**

When Thomas Paine published "Common Sense" in 1776, armed confrontations between British troops and American militia in Massachusetts had already resulted in bloodshed. Tensions were high. America was at a crossroads: war or peace?

To make his case for independence, Paine used history and logic in a document of almost 19,000 words. If a modern day equivalent of Paine's essay were to appear, I expect that few would bother to read it. Beset by relentless, partisan shouting in the mass media, our attention span for political discussion is short, and "Common Sense" is long. Nonetheless, in thousands of homes and public squares and taverns, those who could read Paine's "Common Sense" told those who could not read what Paine had to say about America's situation. Our forbears' subsequent decision to go to war against England gave us our country.



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### **And then what happened?**

I am more interested in our political scene than most. A few years ago, seeking to deepen my understanding of our country, I began reading biographies of our presidents, beginning with George Washington, and working my way forward. A few presidents were of such little account that their biographies were hard to come by, and so I skipped four or five. Nonetheless, I concluded that until our present time, there were three critical presidencies in our history, when the future of our nation was uncertain.

The first was the presidency of George Washington. The basic issue was — could a new union of diverse states with a representative form of government endure? Some wanted a strong federal government, and some not. The politics were contentious and vitriolic, but Washington guided America through those formative years with moderation and sagacity.

The second was the Abraham Lincoln presidency. He went to war against fellow Americans to preserve that union of states, and refused to bend until the union and the Constitution were preserved.

The third presidency was Franklin Roosevelt's. During the greatest economic calamity in our nation's history, one that threatened the foundations of our capitalist system, Roosevelt established a social contract between the federal government and individual citizens that helped them to survive. That social contract now ensures the dignity and health of millions through such programs as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

# Common Sense 2012

**I believe we are in another critical presidency,  
unparalleled in its ironies**

**T**o begin, never mind that Barack Obama is the first non-white President in our nation's 224-year history. Never mind that, during his campaign in 2008, most Americans said that our expensive, dysfunctional health care system was one of our country's biggest problems.<sup>3</sup> Never mind that, after eight years of an increasingly troubled economy, a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, and two protracted wars, America was ready to make big changes.

No, in a quirk of history — literally months before President Obama took office — our country was plunged into the Great Recession. In a year's time, from July 2008 to June 2009, five million Americans lost their jobs.<sup>4</sup> The number of mortgage foreclosures and bankruptcies ballooned.

What caused the crash? Consider this: In the 1960s, the financial sector of our economy — banks, investment funds, insurance companies, real estate — produced about 15% of our domestic corporate profits. By 2003, the financial sector was producing more than 40% of our domestic corporate profits.<sup>5</sup> We had become a nation of money managers, operating under *laissez-faire* government oversight and using increasingly exotic financial instruments to create massive, paper profits. In this heady investment climate, the Dow-Jones index reached an all-time high of 14,164 in 2007, almost doubling the low of just five years earlier.<sup>6</sup> When the real estate and investment bubbles burst in 2007, America's entire financial system came dangerously close to collapse. Our chickens had come home to roost.

But America was not the same roost.

From just a decade earlier, we had become a different country.

### **Greed is good!**

The American dream we lived in the early 2000s had been just that, a dream, rooted in the idea that an

unregulated economy and an unregulated financial marketplace led to prosperity. Indeed, just months before the Great Recession, U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson lectured the Chinese, saying, “An open, competitive, and liberalized financial market can effectively allocate scarce resources in a manner that promotes stability and prosperity far better than governmental intervention.”<sup>7</sup>

Yeah, right!

### **Six ways things went bad**

A lot happened to make us a different country, but here are six of the most important things.

First, an increasingly global economy changed the structure of our manufacturing economy. From 2001 to 2004, almost 3 million American manufacturing jobs disappeared — the backbone of blue-collar well-being.<sup>8</sup> Many factories went to Mexico or offshore, where labor costs were lower. To keep factories operating, U.S. labor made wage and benefit concessions, and took home smaller paychecks. But it was a losing battle. Unable to compete in producing clothing, shoes, paper goods, machinery, metal products, automobiles, and dozens of other product lines, U.S. factories closed, and we bought more and more goods from abroad. Annual imports from China alone more than tripled, from \$102 billion in 2001 to \$337 billion in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

Second, in 2004, relaxed government policies and regulations enabled super-size financial institutions to put more of their assets at risk, making more money available in the marketplace.<sup>10</sup> One result was that the mortgage industry changed. With more money available from both private and government sources, thousands of “mortgage brokers” approved home loans for millions of Americans with shaky qualifications. The resulting “sub-prime” mortgages were bundled with more solid mortgages and sold, which provided still more money to make still more loans. Mortgages were repackaged and resold so many

times it became hard to determine who actually held a particular mortgage, and who was at risk if that mortgage went bad.

With all that easy money and more potential buyers, the housing industry boomed. For many years, the U.S. had seen from 1.4 to 1.7 million housing starts a year. That figure began climbing, and reached an annualized peak in early 2006 of almost 2.3 million housing starts, almost 70% more than the average, and the most in history.<sup>11</sup>

With demand for homes high, prices rose. In some areas, home values increased by 10, 15, and even 20% a year. To homeowners, the increased value of their homes represented greater personal wealth. Banks and other financial institutions encouraged them to use this increased wealth to take out “equity” loans to buy a new car, new furniture, to build an addition to the house, or to take a special vacation.

Then, the housing bubble burst. With the economy faltering, housing starts fell back to 1.4 million by early 2007, and kept falling. When President Obama was sworn into office less than two years later, housing starts were at an annual rate of less than .5 million, the fewest in more than sixty years.

Third, not only the housing market was destined to collapse. Those same super-size financial institutions had also made it easier for consumers to accumulate credit card debt. As with mortgage debt and “equity” debt, credit card debt was bundled and resold, generating still more cash for consumers to borrow. Households were flooded with offers for new credit cards. They could “roll over” existing debt on several credit cards to a new credit card, and not make payments for six months. A new group of consumers came of age with a “buy now, pay later” mentality. By early 2008, the average American household was carrying a credit card balance of almost \$8,500, more than triple the amount of a few years earlier. And credit card interest rates commonly exceeded 15%.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, from 2001 to 2008, except for the housing bubble and our expanding health care system, the U.S. economy was generally anemic. Job growth was the worst since the government began keeping records in 1939 — averaging just 375,000 new jobs per year.<sup>13</sup> Wages were stagnant. The U.S. savings rate hit an all-time low of 1.5%.<sup>14</sup> By the time the Great Recession hit, millions of households were getting by paycheck-to-paycheck, carrying record consumer debt, and watching the value of their homes fall below what they owed on their mortgages.

Fifth, not just the American consumer was living on credit. In 2000, the last year President Clinton was in office, the U.S. federal budget showed a surplus of \$86 billion, and the national debt was \$5.674 trillion. Because of a large tax cut, two unfunded wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a new, unfunded expansion of Medicare, the federal government ran deficits every year between 2001 and 2008, and our national debt increased by almost 77%, to \$10,024 trillion.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, from 2001 to 2007, the incomes of eighty percent of American families saw little increase (or even fell), while the incomes of the top twenty percent saw healthy growth, and the top one percent saw their incomes grow by 35%.<sup>16</sup> This spectacular growth enabled the top one percent to increase their share of our nation's financial wealth to almost 43%.<sup>17</sup>

In short, from 2001 to 2008, eighty percent of America suffered economic hardship brought about by a global economy, job losses, stagnant wages, inadequate financial industry regulation, and little job creation, and the very rich got very much richer.

Those are the facts.<sup>18</sup>

### **What have we come to?**

I do not know why some people are so passionate about their political views. Heated political arguments jeopardize dinner parties, family gatherings, and even friendships.

When I feel my heat rise from time to time in discussing some political matter, I need to remind myself that people and politics are like people and cars: some are loyal to Fords, because they believe Fords are best. Some are loyal to Hondas, because they believe Hondas are best. Their beliefs may or may not have a rational basis (as often is the case with beliefs), but such loyalty can become passionate, and can seldom be swayed.

Democrats and Republicans are often unswerving loyalists. In general, Democrats believe government can be good, and Republicans believe the less government the better. We can argue until the cows come home and long past milking time about how much government is good for America. Some issues are as old as our country. Alexander Hamilton believed that a federal bank would benefit our new nation, while Thomas Jefferson believed that it would endanger our democracy. The dispute still lives. Today, some argue that the Federal Reserve Bank is vital to our economic well-being, while others want to abolish it.

My experience has shown me that government can help to make America a better place. I am not a Democratic Party loyalist, however. I hold to Lord Acton's observation: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and I have seen too many instances of power corrupted, by both Democrats and Republicans. Instead, I try to be an informed voter. Too bad that I find being an informed voter so frustrating.

Perhaps it has always been so, but I imagine the extremes of our current political scene as two, spittle-spouting ideologies positioned on opposite sides of a great, canyon-like divide. Certain of the truth of their beliefs, the adherents of one ideology shout their assertions across the chasm, but to their opposites across the way, their shouting is just indistinct babble. Nonetheless, they shout their own beliefs back at the other side.

Maybe that is all these ideologues really care about — shouting their convictions back and forth across the divide. But they accomplish nothing, except to arouse those on their own side with the excitement of the shouting.

We hear a lot of political shouting in America, and especially since the advent of cable TV. I think there is even more shouting on AM radio, which is too bad, because vast stretches of America can access little more than AM radio, which is saturated with syndicated talk programs that tend to feature conservative hosts who love to shout.

I recall a day during the 2008 presidential campaign when I was in my car and listening to Rush Limbaugh, just such a conservative host. Like today, polling at the time showed that high gasoline prices were near the top of the list of important issues for voters.

I do not know what Americans had in mind when they wanted the president (whether it was to be Senator John McCain or Senator Barack Obama) to “do something” about high gasoline prices. Our free enterprise oil industry supplies every gallon of gasoline we put into our vehicles, and operates in a worldwide market of supply and demand.

Barack Obama pointed out that Senator McCain’s position of “Drill, baby, drill” was not a practical solution to current high gasoline prices. Finding new oil and bringing it to market takes years. He suggested instead that just keeping our car tires properly inflated would give us better mileage, and save money on gas. That was the same suggestion the first Bush Administration made to consumers in 1991 in another time of high gasoline prices, based on what the Tire Industry Safety Council estimated — under-inflated tires wasted some 4 million gallons of gas a day.<sup>19</sup> At \$4 a gallon, under-inflated tires were costing motorists some \$16 million dollars a day, or almost \$6 billion a year.

Despite the factual basis of Obama's suggestion, entertainer Rush Limbaugh gleefully used much of an entire day's radio program to mock "Barack Hussein Obama" and his tire pressure suggestion. Limbaugh's listeners called to echo the jowly entertainer's jabs. Some even argued that higher tire pressure actually lowered gas mileage!

I have come to recognize that, like so many radio and TV personalities, conservative and liberal alike, Rush Limbaugh "preaches to the choir." His listeners want to hear only what reinforces their beliefs.

Unfortunately, that is human nature, and why it is nearly impossible to change someone's belief. For instance, if John believes something to be true — like, tire pressure does not affect gas mileage — and information comes to hand showing that tire pressure does indeed affect gas mileage, the conflict between John's belief and the fact creates "cognitive dissonance." The fact does not jibe with John's belief. John finds that "dissonance" uncomfortable, but rather than change his belief, John ignores the fact, so he can remain comfortable with his belief. In effect, he says, "Don't bother me with the facts, because my mind is made up." Sigh!<sup>20</sup>

**Ma, Ma, where's my pa?  
Gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha!**<sup>21</sup>

The couplet above that mocked President Grover Cleveland reminds me that the snide assaults on President Obama's citizenship, religion, and character are not new.

I do not understand this behavior. When America elected Barack Obama, we gave him almost 10 million more votes than Senator McCain. Obama received 63% of the electoral votes. His election was a decisive affirmation of his proposed policies. Like the presidents before him, he became "our" president.

In my view, however, much of America was not ready to accept a non-white president, let alone one who wanted

to use the tools of government to help create a better America. In any case, after the polite formalities of the inauguration ceremonies and festivities, conservatives drew their battle lines to oppose whatever our new president wanted to do.

Early on, President Obama extended a hand to the other side, offering to work together for the greater good. That is the way our government is supposed to function. America's diverse interests try to have their way, but the goal is to reach a middle ground, and to solve our country's problems.

Instead, the Republican leader in the U.S. Senate, Kentucky's Mitch McConnell, announced that the "single most important thing" Republicans wanted to achieve was to make sure that President Obama was a one-term president. To me, that sure sounds like party over country. He and his Republican colleagues then used the threat of filibusters and other parliamentary tools to repeatedly block Democratic legislation in the Senate. McConnell's tactics made the going rough for President Obama.

**America wanted job creation. Republicans opposed government intervention in the job market.**

**America wanted health care reform. Republicans opposed more government involvement.**

**America wanted financial institution reforms. Republicans opposed more regulations.**

**America wanted out of Iraq. Republicans called Obama's plan "cut and run."**

Years hence, we will have forgotten the sound-bite wars on TV that passed for public discussion of these and other issues. We will also have forgotten the accommodations reached to settle, at least for a time, these and other

issues. However, after much rancorous debate, and political and parliamentary game playing, our elected officials actually gave us a federal economic stimulus program, health care reform, financial institution reforms, and got us out of Iraq. That is much of what the American people said they wanted during the 2008 campaign. No interest group got everything it hoped for, and the system worked the way it usually works — a messy, contentious process that frayed legislative nerves and relationships, and frustrated the electorate. But it got done. And lo! gas prices went down besides, and without “Drill, Baby, Drill!”

### **The agony**

Our representative democracy at work is not easy to watch — I mean, literally not easy to watch — because most Americans get most of their information about government from television. Political advertisements *ad nauseam* aside, coverage of government and politics is superficial, non-confrontational, and a captive of the “commercial break.” How often an interviewer says to a politico: “Quickly, can you...” or “In just the fifteen seconds we have left, can you...” or “I’m sorry I have to cut you off, but...?” Our dependence on television funded by paid advertising discourages thoughtful, in-depth reporting.

Indeed, the constant battle for TV ratings that will boost advertising revenue has given us a discouraging sameness of telegenic hosts who fill hours of TV time with formulaic interviews, panels, and shop-worn pundits, analysts, strategists, and commentators. Interviewers seldom challenge the statements of our politicians, which are laden with scripted “talking points” that are often preceded by “the fact of the matter is,” which of course is never the fact of the matter.

Few interviewers possess a fund of information about a particular subject that could lead to probing follow-up questions, or if they do, they do not use it, as if they are fearful of offending the politico. For example, if a politico says that opening up more areas for oil drilling would

bring down the price of gasoline, it would be useful for the interviewer to point out a recent study by the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Opening the East Coast, West Coast and Florida's Gulf Coast to drilling would yield just 500,000 extra barrels a day, *by 2030!* And the effect would lower the price of gasoline about 3 cents a gallon.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the interviewer usually asks a question, gets an answer that is little more than a talking point or two, or is evasive, or is off the subject, and then the interviewer moves on to ask another question about another subject. How I would love to hear an interviewer say, "You didn't answer my question," or, "Why don't you answer the question?" or, "What you are saying is not supported by the facts."

Unfortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* enabled a huge industry of shadowy organizations called "super PACs" to flourish, and to further obfuscate our political process. They spend millions of dollars on advertisements that misinform, mislead, and manipulate the unwary.

Organizations that try to influence elections are not new, of course: the US Chamber of Commerce, the American Medical Association, and the AFL-CIO are familiar examples. But such organizations depend on membership for their support and direction, and focus mainly on issues that affect their members. By their very nature, we usually know who they are and what legislation and regulation they do or do not want.

Nowadays, however, we cannot tell who is operating behind the scene, because the law enables wealthy individuals and corporations to provide unlimited funding to influence voters through super PACs, and not reveal their identities for months, which can be *after* an election. Typically, this secret spending hides behind innocuous or misleading names like Campaign for Working Families (conservative), Democracy for America (liberal), or Move America Forward (conservative). Their advertisements are a wealth of clever half-truths and carefully parsed "facts."

This year's Republican presidential nomination process has demonstrated how, through these shadowy organizations, a wealthy individual can pump millions of dollars into a race to make or break a candidacy. For example, Sheldon Adelman and his wife Miriam have so far donated \$10 million to Winning Our Future, a super PAC that supports presidential aspirant Newt Gingrich. As George Orwell might have observed: "All voters are equal, but under *Citizens United*, some voters are more equal than others."

### **"Calling Mr. Smith"**

So far, I have lived under thirteen presidents, and have seen many politicians come and go. I would like to believe that, like me, these politicians entered politics because they wanted to help make our country a better place. Perhaps most did.

**Party discipline is paramount. Money rules.**

I am not sure about today, however. Privileged, well-off males who limited participation to other privileged, well-off males shaped our nation's nascent government. Only gradually did we become a populist, representative democracy. The strength of that democracy was later epitomized by the film, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." An ordinary man with a well-developed sense of right and wrong, Mr. Smith takes on the corrupt Washington establishment, and triumphs.

We seem to have very few Mr. Smiths today. Instead, we are reverting to a Washington government by the privileged. Two-thirds of our U.S. Senators are millionaires. Almost half the members of the House of Representatives are millionaires.<sup>23</sup> Until shown otherwise, I accept the truth of the statement that "in a representative democracy, the distribution of power is often related to the distribution of wealth."<sup>24</sup> In this case, the power is government, and wealth is controlling that

power. In effect, moneyed interests are controlling our government.

Rich or poor, of course, we have common interests — personal safety, a healthy environment, a safe food supply — but we have self-interests also, and I am sure that the wealthy have self-interests related to their wealth. So, if our Congress is dominated by the wealthy, and 43% of our nation's wealth is controlled by 1% of our population, what conclusion can I draw, as part of the other 99%, but that, when it comes to my own self-interests, it is a matter of me versus them?

Is that class warfare? Hardly. I might want government to do something, while another does not. We vote for compatriots that we think will best represent both our common interests and our self-interests. In the end, however, a thoughtful representative negotiates to achieve what is possible. In the legislative marketplace, with hundreds of issues to resolve, each of our representatives tries to get as much as possible on a particular issue to satisfy "the folks back home." The give and take of making a deal is often passionate, vitriolic, and petty, but that is how our system works. And therein is the genius of our representative democracy. In the best case, something eventually gets done, nobody gets everything they want, and our constantly evolving, diverse country keeps on going.

At least, theoretically.

But that is not how Washington operates now. Today, party discipline is paramount. Party ideologues control the machinery. Money rules. The result is near paralysis of the legislative process. And our nation suffers. The Congress should be ashamed.

### **High hopes**

The 2008 presidential candidacies of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton made the trends in America clear: we are becoming more willing to embrace racial and gender equality. Those under age 50 are leading the way.

First, they are Americans who grew up in a land of racial equality *under the law*. In many urban areas, these Americans lived in integrated neighborhoods, attended integrated schools, and had friends and playmates of different races and ethnicities.

Second, they also grew up in a land of gender equality in our schools, thanks to Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in education based on gender. The results of Title IX have been dramatic: Before its passage in 1972, women earned just 7% of all law degrees and 9% of all medical degrees. By 2001, women received 47% of law degrees, 43% of medical degrees, and nearly half of all doctoral degrees.<sup>25</sup> In short, a majority of those under 50 do not have the racial and gender hang-ups of their elders.

Third, they do not have the sexual hang-ups of their elders. Gays and lesbians number among their friends and family. Most of those under-50 I talk with about such matters indicate, "what's the big deal?"

Fourth, thanks to unprecedented opportunities for higher education for those under age 50, 30% of adult Americans now hold four-year college degrees (or higher), the most in our history.

Because of these factors (and probably others) those under age 50 comprise an increasing swath of the American electorate. They are smart and informed, and constitute a large part of the great, independent-thinking middle.

The implications of this development for the 2012 elections are great, provided that we do something about it.

In 1976, the movie "Network" satirized the lengths to which the television industry will go to garner high ratings. The industry's excesses then were like the excesses of our money-bloated electoral process today. In a memorable line in the movie, a long-time TV broadcaster instructs his audience to "get up right now

and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out, and yell, 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!'" And they did.

That is what we need to do. If we want the kind of America that serves the interests of the middle, we need to turn off the TV, get out of our chairs, and get active. We need to challenge candidates. Are you willing to break with your party? Are you willing to act as an independent? Are you willing to seek the middle ground? If not, then I will not support you.

### **The great, independent-thinking middle**

I believe we are at a critical juncture in our nation's history. The coming elections will shape the direction of our country for years to come. I also believe that the coming elections will not be decided by money, but by the great, independent-thinking middle. Our millions of votes are the countervailing power to the hundreds of millions of dollars that will be spent on slick radio and TV ads. Our critical thinking is the countervailing power to the influence of radio and TV hosts who fill the airways with misinformation and divisive innuendo. We will pit the strengths of our numbers and our critical thinking against their money, and we will win, and America will be a better place for it.

### **As for me**

I will not vote for my incumbent congressional representative, Paul Ryan, a darling of fiscal conservatives. I believe he is too rigid, and too much an ideologue. On the other hand, I will vote for President Obama. As far as I am concerned, he has done a pretty good job, especially when I consider what he has been up against.

I believe he is one of the smartest presidents we have had in a long time. His vision of what will make America a better place is close to mine — better schools, a better health care system, better consumer protection, and a

lean but strong and forward-looking military. He wants to repair and improve our crumbling infrastructure, preserve and protect our environment, invest in our renewable energy system, and help train a workforce that will enable America to compete and succeed in the global economy. And he will continue building our national image abroad.

Only occasionally does a politico rise above the rest with the vision of where America needs to go, a vision that transcends party ideologies and provides a well-considered plan to get us there. I have come to believe that Barack Obama is such a person, a modern-day Aristedes, the ancient Greek who always acted for the greatest good.

President Obama will have my support. At bottom, he wants America to be a better place for me and the 99%. And so do I.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Dreier, "Reagan's Real Legacy," *The Nation*, February 4, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> According to the National Employment Law Project, if the federal minimum wage had kept pace with inflation over the past forty years, today's minimum wage would be \$10.39. [www.nelp.org/content/content\\_issues/category/federal\\_minimum\\_wage](http://www.nelp.org/content/content_issues/category/federal_minimum_wage) Today, the hourly pay range for American assembly line workers is \$9.26 - \$13.32 for women, and \$9.94 - \$15.45 for men.

[www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Assembly\\_Line\\_Worker,\\_Factory/Hourly\\_Rate](http://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Assembly_Line_Worker,_Factory/Hourly_Rate)

<sup>3</sup> Americans ranked health care as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most important issue facing the country in 2008, following jobs (1<sup>st</sup>) and gas prices (2<sup>nd</sup>). [www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMSr0807717](http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMSr0807717). From 2001-2008, health care spending per capita increased from \$5,241 to \$7,911, an increase of almost 51%.

[www.cms.gov/NationalHealthExpendData/downloads/tables.pdf](http://www.cms.gov/NationalHealthExpendData/downloads/tables.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost>, LNS13023621

<sup>5</sup> "Economic Report of the President: 2010 Report Spreadsheet Tables,"

[www.gpoaccess.gov/eop/tables10.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/eop/tables10.html), Table B-91

<sup>6</sup> [www.mdleasing.com/djia.htm](http://www.mdleasing.com/djia.htm)

<sup>7</sup> [www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aC17bFUJzWRk](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aC17bFUJzWRk)

<sup>8</sup> [www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/97xx/doc9749/12-23-Manufacturing.pdf](http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/97xx/doc9749/12-23-Manufacturing.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html#2001](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html#2001)

<sup>10</sup> The Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999 permitted commercial banks, investment banks, securities firms, and insurance companies to consolidate. Some (like the conservative Cato Institute) dispute that the Act had a direct impact on the financial sector collapse.

<sup>11</sup> [www.forecast-chart.com/chart-housing-starts.html](http://www.forecast-chart.com/chart-housing-starts.html)

<sup>12</sup> [www.chartingtheeconomy.com/?p=1174](http://www.chartingtheeconomy.com/?p=1174)

<sup>13</sup> "Bush On Jobs: The Worst Track Record on Record," *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2009

<sup>14</sup> Extrapolated from [www.creditwritedowns.com/2010/02/chart-of-the-day-u-s-savings-rate-over-last-60-years.html](http://www.creditwritedowns.com/2010/02/chart-of-the-day-u-s-savings-rate-over-last-60-years.html)

<sup>15</sup> Clinton's surplus is from "Revenues, Outlays, Deficits, Surpluses, and Debt Held by the Public, 1968 to 2007, in Billions of Dollars," Congressional Budget Office, Office of Management and Budget, September 2008. The national debt figures are

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from

[www.treasurydirect.gov/govt/reports/pd/histdebt/histdebt\\_histo5.htm](http://www.treasurydirect.gov/govt/reports/pd/histdebt/histdebt_histo5.htm)

<sup>16</sup> <http://motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-in-america-chart-graph>

<sup>17</sup> [www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html](http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html). Some argue that the Great Recession hit the rich equally hard. However, because the homes of most Americans represent the largest portion of their personal wealth, such homeowners lost a much larger share of their personal wealth when home values plunged.

<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of U.S. wealth distribution during this period, see Edward N. Wolff, "Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze—an Update to 2007,"

[www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp\\_589.pdf](http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_589.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1290&dat=19911012&id=C98qAAAAIBAJ&sjid=d40DAAAAIBAJ&pg=1096,2152146>

<sup>20</sup> Soon after Obama talked about keeping tires properly inflated, Republicans began giving away tire gauges with the message: Obama's Energy Plan.

<sup>21</sup> A political jab at Grover Cleveland, elected twice, as our 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> President, who supposedly fathered a child out of wedlock.

<sup>22</sup> [http://money.cnn.com/2012/02/24/news/economy/gingrich\\_gas\\_prices/index.htm?source=cnn\\_bin](http://money.cnn.com/2012/02/24/news/economy/gingrich_gas_prices/index.htm?source=cnn_bin)

<sup>23</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/11/47-of-congress-members-millionaires-a-status-shared-by-only-1-of-americans/>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp\\_589.pdf](http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_589.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.now.org/issues/title\\_ix/](http://www.now.org/issues/title_ix/)