The American Demise?

The world is full of people waiting eagerly to sound the death knell for the American Era. From radical Islamists to foreign media outlets, they say, "The 20th century belonged to America, but its time has now passed." At home, there are just as many, if not more, who agree with this statement. America is perceived as a beleaguered nation, beaten down and falling apart in ways too numerous to count.

Sadly, much of what is said is true. There are significant problems in America. However, the future of this nation is not so clearly one of doom and gloom as we might think. Other nations also have significant problems and Americans have proven themselves over the past two centuries to be an innovative, hard-working people. Perhaps, it is possible for our nation to return to greatness even after the struggles of the past decade.

If we are to do so, there must be changes made on many fronts. These changes do not mean a return to the past. They mean grabbing hold of a new future. The world has changed and we must change with it. In some cases, this means returning to the character qualities that were the foundation of our success and, in other cases, it means developing a whole new approach to how our country operates.

The following essay highlights some of the problems facing our nation. While nothing presented here provides a fully comprehensive solution, I hope to draw a clear picture of the challenges ahead and point in the direction where, somewhere over the distant hills, the best solution may be found.

The Shrinking World

At the start of the new century, December 31, 1900, Teddy Roosevelt completed his last day as governor of New York by attending a dinner in his honor. Although Teddy was leaving the executive mansion and its $10,000 annual salary behind, he was not leaving public office.[1] He had already been elected Vice President of the United States and, in just over two months, he would take his oath of office in the administration of William McKinley.

Tragically, only 194 days after that oath, on September 14, 1901, the assassination of President McKinley would set the stage for Theodore Roosevelt to become the youngest president of the United States of America.[2]

In many ways, Theodore Roosevelt was a man perfectly suited for his time. He was an adventurer in an age of adventure and a fighter in a time of fights. A Harvard-educated cowboy, Teddy embodied all of the rough-and-tumble of the Wild West and all of the sophistication of the Ivy League East. Even more, he came of age at the same time America did.

[1] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Almanac*, 1900 Edition, Bulkley, Dunton & Company, New York, p. 497.
[2] President McKinley was shot on September 6, 1901 and died on September 14, 1901. John F. Kennedy is the youngest elected president. However, Theodore Roosevelt was younger when he took office.

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The America that entered the 20th century was no longer the isolated offspring of the more significant European powers. Even in de Tocqueville's day, 1831, America was recognized as a significant nation.[3] What had been lacking, however, was the ability of America to influence the rest of the world. As Henry Ward Beecher, the fiery preacher, said, "Greatness lies not in being strong, but in the using of strength."[4] America was strong, but she had yet to use her strength on the international stage.

That would all change as Teddy Roosevelt took the oath of office as President of the United States on September 14th at the Ansley Wilcox Mansion in Buffalo, New York. Over the course of the next eight years, President Roosevelt would begin construction of the Panama Canal, earn the Nobel Peace Prize, and send the American navy on a round-the-world tour. This 14 month voyage would demonstrate to the world not only America's military might, but her ability to send it anywhere on the globe.

While much can be made of the personality and energy of Roosevelt to launch our nation into the "American Century," as Henry R. Luce called it in 1941, it must not be forgotten that what set the stage for America's ascendance was technology.

The Atlantic and Pacific oceans had served as great barriers for our first hundred years as a nation. In the last half of the 19th century, though, transatlantic telegraph cables had made communication with the European Continent not only instantaneous, but practical. Likewise, advances in ocean travel had meant that, in 1907, the *Lusitania* could make the westward crossing in under a week. Long gone were the days when mail was the only means of communication and ship passages took three weeks to complete.

The advent of a "smaller" world gave opportunity for America's entrance as a significant power on the world stage. This significance would be enhanced in World War I as Black Jack Pershing led the American Expeditionary Forces into the Second Battle of the Marne at the same time that Quentin Roosevelt, Teddy's youngest son, would be shot down in his Nieuport fighter plane near Chamery. After the war, America returned to her shores, no longer interested in being a world power. It had cost too many of her boys to want to get involved again.

Within 25 years, though, America found itself embroiled in another world war. The world in the intervening years had gotten smaller once again. Now, threats in Europe and Asia risked spilling over onto the North and South American continents. It was no longer a matter of choice to be involved in war. Sooner or later, war would find us. The day that would live in infamy forced America back onto the world stage – a place it would not relinquish as long as the 20th century continued.

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[3] "What most astonishes me in the United States is not so much the marvelous grandeur of some undertakings, as the innumerable multitude of small ones." – Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Book 2, Chapter 19.

[4] *Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers*, p. 292.

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After the war, The United States remained a dominant world power. This new-found dominance was solidified by the Marshall Plan. All one needed to do was take a short trip into East Germany and compare it to its western sister to see and appreciate all that America was doing. By 1952, when the plan ended, the economies of the participating nations actually surpassed their pre-war levels. No nation in history ever acted so benevolently toward friends and foes alike. And no nation in history is owed so great a debt in gratitude as America.

As communism collapsed in Russia, Boris Yeltsin rose to fame, fighting off a coup attempt against Gorbachev by rallying the Russian people with his now-famous speech from atop a tank turret. As Yeltsin stood astride the tank, America stood even taller – astride the entire world as its greatest power at the dawn of the 21st century.

And yet, by 2010, many were questioning the preeminence of America in the world. The world's economic crisis, the growth of the economies of China, India and Brazil, and the loss of American industrial capacity all sparked comment here and abroad. Was this really the "end of the American Era" as Charles Kupchan theorized in 2002?[5]

In the midst of the hand-wringing and nay-saying, many different causes of America's struggles have been debated. Yet, in the midst of it all, what is often not seen is that one of the main causes of our difficulties is the same as the original cause of our ascendency. Because of improvements in technology, the world has gotten smaller.

In particular, labor and logistic costs have made industrial production cheaper elsewhere than at home. Likewise, information moving at nearly light speed across continents has altered the entire landscape of business, government and society. This has all collapsed the distance between American and the rest of the world into a matter of seconds or, at most, hours. The challenge to America today is to adapt to a new, smaller world, and achieve success within this interconnectedness rather than in ignorance of it. There also needs to be a change in America itself if we are to even be able to adapt.

The Lost Heritage

Tom Brokaw called the generation that fought in World War II the "greatest generation."[6] Raised in the Great Depression and thrust into the chilly waters off of Omaha Beach, they changed the course of history by their courage and commitment.

One man, Richard Antrim, saw another prisoner of war being beaten almost certainly to death. He stepped in to save the severely wounded man by offering to take the rest of his punishment.[7] This act of singular courage saved the other man's life and changed the way American prisoners were treated from then on. Who cannot admire such men as Commander Antrim?

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[5] *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the 21st Century*, Knopf, 2002.
[6] Brokaw, Tom, *The Greatest Generation*, Random House, 1998, p. xxx.
[7] From his Medal of Honor citation

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Today, a simple gravestone – one like almost all of the others – marks Richard Antrim's final resting place at Section 35, Grave 2613 in Arlington National Cemetery. Sadly, it seems that the character that produced the greatest generation has, for the most part, also been buried at Arlington, Golden Gate and a host of other cemeteries spanning the globe.

America in 1940 had many faults. What is written here is not a Polly Anna walk down Memory Lane. However, the facts are clear. In 1940, the divorce rate in America was 20%.[8] Similarly, the number of out-of-wedlock childbirths was 3.8% of the total.[9] In 1980, as the baby boomer generation came of age, the divorce rate was 52% and unmarried pregnancies were 18.4% of the total.

Now, much can be said about the need for people to leave awful marriages. There is wisdom in not following up one night's bad decision with a lifetime in an unloving marriage. And yet, there is something noteworthy when we compare these statistics with the lives of Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. and Sheila Higgins.

Theodore Roosevelt Jr., the eldest son of Teddy and Edith Roosevelt, was the oldest soldier and only general officer in the first wave of soldiers to hit the beach on D-Day. With the landing nearly a mile off course, General Roosevelt personally changed the entire plan of battle on the spot and conducted the whole campaign from the beachhead. Later, Omar Bradley would say that the most heroic action he had ever seen was "Ted Roosevelt on Utah Beach." General Roosevelt would die of a heart attack one month later. He is buried next to his brother, Quinten, at the American Cemetery in Normandy.

In contrast, Sheila Higgins[10] served as a soldier in *Desert Storm*. She soon got pregnant by a man who refused to marry her. Sheila left the military and, ten years later, was virtually homeless – never married, with three children by three different fathers. Today, she lives in public housing (Section 8 housing), gets food stamps, receives child support and does a few odd jobs. She is not happy with life, but she is also not so discontented or ashamed that she is willing to do the work to change it.

The stories of Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. and Sheila Higgins are linked to their generations. Roosevelt, while his life was more successful than most, typified the character of his generation. It was a time when a man stood by his word, lived up to his commitments, worked hard and refused help unless he had no other choice. Such a man would climb into a B-25B Mitchell bomber to bomb Japan with no hope of returning to home base on the *USS Hornet*.[11]

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[8] *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 43, No. 9(S), March 22, 1995. (1940 & 1980 divorce figures)
[9] *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 48, No. 16, October 18, 2000. (1940 & 1980 out-of-wedlock birth figures)
[10] Not her real name, although both she and the story presented here are real.
[11] The Doolittle Raid, April 18, 1942. The aircraft in the raid were too big to return and land on the *Hornet* after taking off. Every crew member knew that their mission meant a crash landing somewhere in China (or elsewhere) after the bombing run.

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Sheila may feel some shame and humiliation at her plight but, unlike most in the prior generation, her material situation matters more to her than these deeper issues of character. So, she is willing to suffer the indignities of receiving government and private assistance. She has sacrificed her character on the altar of comfort.[12] The only difference between Sheila and a man like Bernie Madoff is one of skill and opportunity; at their core, both are the same.

Perhaps the first one to see the decline of character in America was Omar Bradley. In a speech given in on November 11, 1948, he observes:

> "We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount . . . The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants."[13]

While Bradley's words were directed at national leaders, Martin Luther King saw a similar decline in character among those at the other end of the social, economic and political spectrum. Just six months before his body would lie, bleeding, on the balcony floor of the Lorraine Motel, King spoke at Barratt Junior High in Philadelphia on October 26, 1967. It was a pleasant fall day, about 54°F, as a stunned eleven-year-old Abraham Holman sat listening in the school auditorium. Dr. King encouraged him and the other 1,000 people in attendance to be people of dignity and excellence. He said:

> "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."[14]

In a remarkable coincidence, on the same day that the Dr. King spoke these words, a young naval lieutenant was shot down over Vietnam and began what would be a gut-wrenching five and a half year experience of torture as a prisoner of war. This man's bravery is all the more remarkable for his refusal to accept an early release when it was offered to him.[15] And even though we might find great differences between John McCain and Martin Luther King (and faults in each of them), both men, when it counted, exhibited the character that made America the greatest nation of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, many of the children and grandchildren that followed the greatest generation have typically lost sight of their heritage. Granted, there are notable exceptions, but, for the

[12] Granted, the plight of the poor is far more complex than this vignette allows. However, this story is sadly accurate concerning the motivation of many of the poor.
[13] Collected Writings, vol. 1 (1967).
[14] This speech is typically titled, *"What is Your Life's Blueprint?"*
[15] McCain's father, a Navy admiral, was made the commander in chief of all naval forces in the Pacific (CINCPAC). As a propaganda move, the North Vietnamese offered John McCain his freedom. McCain's refusal not only meant further imprisonment, but also increased torture for his unwillingness to cooperate.

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most part, the character that accomplished so much in 1945 was missing from the majority of Americans in 2005. The values of the World War II generation ran far deeper than a momentary act of battlefield bravery. They were something that people lived by – every day and in every situation. Just as Dr. King noted in 1967, dignity and effort matter more than accomplishment. No one can ensure success in life, but everyone can make the choice to live in the dignity that comes from honesty, hard work and treating others the way we want to be treated.

In 1940, it mattered more who a man was and not what he did for a living. Born of the Great Depression, that generation understood that there was such a thing as personal responsibility and the notion that each person should live up to his or her word. It was an important value to make sacrifices now for the good of those in the future. Such a commitment to character and the future gave life, even for the least religious people, a sense of purpose and meaning. The result was a prosperous and powerful America.

Sadly, the next generations inherited all of America's material success without understanding its source or building the character to handle it wisely. Instead, they tended to live self-focused lives, accepting no outside compass of morality or deeper sense of purpose beyond self-gratification. Today, the American culture is so infused with this way of thinking that the values of the greatest generation seem utterly foreign to most.

Should we go back to 1940 with its lack of indoor plumbing in many homes? Would a return to the harshness of living just above subsistence level on a rural farm do us good? Maybe. But such a retreat from society's technological advancements and improvements will never teach us how to have character in the midst of an advanced society. Somehow, though, America must regain her moral compass and a vision of human dignity. She must place a greater value on character than materialism. In doing so, not only will we take a major step back to greatness, but maybe we will also discover that the permanent satisfaction of virtue is more fulfilling than the emptiness we feel when the excitement of our latest gadget begins to wear off.

The Foolish Dream

Those who survived World War II came home to one of the greatest opportunities they could hope for – college. In 1940, 1.5 million students were enrolled in college.[16] After World War II, 2.2 million veterans flooded our nation's universities.[17] This deluge of college freshmen was the result of the G.I. Bill, an act of Congress that was initially sketched out by Harry W. Colmery on some stationery and a napkin at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC.[18]

The goal of the G.I. Bill was not to change the landscape of American society. Rather, Congress wanted to find a way to re-integrate returning soldiers so that the country would not slide into another Great Depression. Congress also wanted to avoid a repeat of the Bonus March of 1932.

[16] U.S. Census Bureau
[17] Wilson, Reginald, *The G.I. Bill and the Transformation of America*, National Forum, Fall 1995.
[18] *The Father of the G.I. Bill of Rights*, The Topeka Capital-Journal, November 11, 2003.

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The idea of seeing Douglas MacArthur out on the National Mall for a second time using the military to drive protesting veterans and their families out of Washington, D.C. was not something anyone desired.

Up until the G.I. Bill, college had been out of reach for most people. The ten percent who did go to college were typically from the wealthier segment of society. But, by 1944, college became a real possibility for veterans from all walks of life. What Colmery probably never realized was that once these veterans had gone to college, they would want the same opportunity for their children. Today, college is considered a key ingredient to both a person's social status and their financial success. It is no wonder, then, that colleges had 18.2 million students enrolled in them in 2009.[19,20]

In fact, a comparison of the education levels of Americans in 1940 to those in 2009 is staggering in its differences. In 1940, almost 60% of the population had no more than an 8th grade education, if that. 4.6% had graduated from college. By 2009, only 5.5% of Americans had less than an 8th grade education and 29.5% had graduated from college.[21] Granted, discussions about the quality of that education will always abound, but the fact remains that American citizens are more educated now than ever before.

One would think that the better educated Americans are, the better incomes and jobs they would have. In fact, this is not the case. Getting a college education does not mean there will be a job available after graduation. An economy only needs a certain number of psychology majors or aeronautical engineers or plumbers. If the proliferation of college degrees is not matched by an increase in the need for those degrees, there will be little economic benefit gained by the graduate or the country. This simple fact has added to the economic turmoil for America.

Our shrinking world and international comparative advantages have caused a dramatic shift in our economic structure. Cheaper labor and fewer regulations have enticed much of our nation's industrial base overseas. The blue-collar world of the 1950's and 1960's is vastly diminished.

The poster child of this change is Youngstown, Ohio. On September 19, 1977, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, one of the world's largest steel manufacturers, abruptly closed its doors. Five thousand people showed up for work that day only to discover that they no longer had any work to show up for and no future paycheck as well.[22] The shock of the closure even inspired poetry to memorialize the experience.[23]

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[19] National Center for Education Statistics.
[20] As a point of reference, the college enrollment population in 1940 was about 1.14% of the total population. In 2009, it was 6.03%. Some of this increase is influenced by the number of college eligible citizens, but most of the change is the result of society's decision to value a college education.
[21] U.S. Census Bureau, CPS historical time series tables, September 2010, Table A-1, "Years of school completed by people 25 years and over, by age and sex: Selected years 1940 to 2009"
[22] Les Christie, *The Incredible Shrinking* City, CNNMoney.com, April 24, 2008.
[23] Carchedi, Vito, *The Last Day*, youngstownsteel.com, poetry page.

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The effect on Youngstown of the death of the American steel industry was immediate and long-lasting. A city with a population of 168,330 in 1950, Youngstown residents numbered only 66,982 in the 2010 Census. Today, about 43% of the land in Youngstown is vacant, and there are about 4,500 uninhabited and dilapidated buildings throughout the city.[24]

Many of us have been living a foolish dream. Our expectation has been that, with a college degree, we would be virtually guaranteed successful careers. In truth, our individual success is tied more to our national and global success than most of us will generally admit. What matters more than being well-trained for a job is the existence of that job in the first place.

For example, Phil Glasson was an MIT graduate with a position as a chemist in a medium-sized business. He never imagined being out of work. Unfortunately, when the economy and the job market collapsed around him, Phil was laid off. As it so happens, Phil's story could have occurred today, even though his experience was in the 1930's.[25,26] There is no such thing as a permanently safe career, even after college, if there is no economic growth.

What is the solution to our foolish dream of college and success? Should we forsake education for the rugged values of hard work? No. Ignorance has never done anyone much good. Should we create trade protections for our industries and bring vital jobs back from overseas? No. Isolationism fails to see that we all do better when we all do better. Separating ourselves from the international economy will bring short-term gain and long-term loss.

The solution to our foolish and failed dream for a better future is going to be found in inventing a new economy. In this new economy, we will have to focus on the critical task of wealth creation.

There are some jobs in the economy that create wealth, while others merely redistribute it. For example, a gold miner or a carpenter will create wealth by taking a raw material and making it more useful to others. On the other hand, many jobs in the American economy today are based more on passing pre-existing wealth around more than on creating new wealth. A fast-food restaurant, for example, does not boost an economy. It merely transfers the money in that economy from one person to another. There is no net gain as occurs in other industries.

A growing economy must be based on wealth creation. And yet, In America, those industries and occupations that generate wealth are often so tightly regulated and subject to lawsuits that starting such a business is very unlikely today. Entrepreneurs would rather search the jungles of Peru for gold than deal with US mining regulations in Montana. And certainly, a mining company will prefer Toronto as its home compared to any city in America.

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[24] Parris, Terry, Jr., *Shrinking right: How Youngstown, Ohio, is miles ahead of Detroit*, modelmedia.com, May 4, 2010.

[25] By the way, Phil brought his family through the Great Depression by working as a day laborer for $10 a week (about $128 per week in today's money).

[26] O'Connor, Dorothy S., *Learning to Read in a Gravel Yard*, The Melrose Mirror, March 4, 2011, accessed on-line.

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If the current American economy continues to move more and more to a service economy, we will continue to see the drain of our country's wealth into those countries that are producing wealth. A service economy creates little wealth because the best it can do is redistribute wealth. As a result, an economy based on a nation's service sector will inevitably decline as its wealth is slowly siphoned off to acquire from other economies the resources needed to operate. It is those other economies that are creating wealth.

To be successful, the new American economy will need to be established on a foundation of wealth creation. This will mean a shift away from a service economy. Such a change will require a new renaissance of historic American ingenuity, inventiveness and creativity. To do this, we will need greater freedoms and flexibility in our economy. It will require facing another significant challenge our country faces today.

Government Overreach

James H. Boren passed away on April 24, 2010. A decorated veteran of World War II, he also served in the US Foreign Service, as an assistant to Senator Ralph Yarborough and as a professor of political science. However, what Mr. Boren is most remembered for is his wit. Acerbic at times, Jim could make a very sharp point in one quick phrase. He ran for president once and his campaign slogan was, "I have what it takes to take what you've got."[27] Likewise, speaking about government in general, Mr. Boren once stated, "Bureaucracy is the epoxy that greases the wheels of progress."[28]

More seriously, Thomas Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1788 to Edward Carrington, a fellow Virginian and a delegate to the Continental Congress.[29] He said, "The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield, and government to gain ground."[30] Jefferson was writing to Carrington concerning the need for a Bill of Rights in the proposed constitution that was being drafted. His concern was that the Continental Congress would give too much power to the government because of the great confidence that they had in the assumed future president. Surrounded by European governments, Jefferson saw clearly that not every future president would be of the same caliber as George Washington.

Gerald Ford, speaking to a joint session of Congress on August 12, 1974, just three days after becoming president, echoed Jefferson's sentiments when he said, "A government big enough to give you everything you want is a government big enough to take from you everything you have."[31] It is perhaps helpful for us to note that, in terms of size, in 2010, state and local

[27] Obituary. Illinoisriver.org, April 24, 2010.
[28] Boren, James H., When in doubt, mumble: a bureaucrat's handbook, 1972
[29] Carrington also served as the jury foreman in the trial of Aaron Burr.
[30] The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Federal Edition (New York and London, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-5). Vol. 5.
[31] This quote is often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, but is not found in his writings. monticello.org

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government employees accounted for 13.6% of the American workforce.[32] By comparison, Greece, whose economic woes were headline news, had a public sector employment of 14.1%.[33]

Now, this is not an anti-government screed. I happen to like having nice roads, policemen, firemen and school teachers. Government has a very useful and important function. And there is certainly a point at which less government and fewer taxes are more detrimental than maintaining a larger government structure. And yet, there are some key facts that lead us to the conclusion that trimming government is both important and necessary.

First, government regulation serves to stifle innovation, creativity and economic growth.

For example, there are 65 different occupations licensed by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies.[34] One of those occupations is barbering, as is the case in many other states. In fact, to become a licensed barber in New York, a person must go to a state-approved barber school (which can be a course lasting up to 660 hours), take a practical exam in which the potential barber cuts someone's hair, and complete a two-year apprenticeship.[35]

Now, I have nothing against barbers. But why do we need to have state agencies to ensure that every barber candidate be licensed and have a certain number of contact hours before they can take their exam? Do we really need to pay someone to ensure that all of the bottles in a barbershop are properly labeled, as is the regulation in Colorado?[36] The sad fact is that none of these regulations can ensure that the customer will even get a good haircut.[37] So why do we have the regulation?[38]

Barbering regulations for the most part seem trivial and amusing, but there is a consequence of such government overreach. It stifles economic growth. You see, it no longer matters how naturally good I am at cutting hair, government regulations prevent me from being able to easily start a business as a barber – and for no reason that benefits the consumer enough to justify the expense.

Now granted, barbering regulations are an easy target among all of the regulatory functions of government, but we can be pretty confident that the triviality of regulations for this one industry is not an isolated occurrence. For example, also in Colorado, there is a list in the state regulations of what information needs to be on a work order form going from the dentist to a

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[32] Schmitt, John, *The Wage Penalty for State and Local Government Employees*, Center for Economic and Policy Research, May 2010.
[33] Lubin, Gus. *10 States Where An Absurd Percentage Of The Population Works For The Government* (capitalization as in the original article), businessinsider.com, June 6, 2010.
[34] dora.state.co.us/licensing
[35] New York State Division of Licensing Services.
[36] Rules and Regulations of the Colorado Office of Barber and Cosmetology Licensure, 4 CCR 731-1.
[37] All you have to do is look at my last haircut to verify this assertion.
[38] In another head-scratcher, in New York State, one of the state's 31 licensed professions includes interior design. I have to wonder what compelling reason there is for government involvement in my selection of pillow shams. New York State Education Department.

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laboratory.[39] Honestly, who cares? And do we really pay someone to enforce this? Whatever limited value to the patient that is added by this regulation is almost certainly not worth the expense to taxpayers of promulgating it, hiring inspectors and providing for the resulting supervision, human resources, retirement programs, office space, and other costs.

On the other hand, there are many areas in which government regulation is necessary. Not all business owners are as well-meaning, competent or environmentally concerned as they ought to be. So, for medium-risk to high-risk enterprises, government regulation is essential. Cutting back on government overreach does not mean that we go back to the days when phosphates ruined the beauty of Lake Erie or that we return to the days of smog-filled Donora, Pennsylvania.

No one believes that our future is to be found in October 1948 when a mixture of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and metal dust was responsible for more than 20 deaths in Donora.[40] But when the most likely danger we face is getting a bad haircut, why not let the consumer vote a bad barber out of business by not coming back? That makes more sense than spending tax dollars on issues that are generally unimportant and could be handled more effectively and cheaply in other ways.

We need to understand that every regulation and law creates a barrier to our own prosperity even as they may benefit us. Only then, can we remove those regulations whose economic benefits are outweighed by the economic losses that their presence creates.

This leads us to the second issue concerning governmental bureaucracy. It is the nature of a bureaucracy to grow, not shrink.[41] Those employed in government have greater job security when there are more regulations, not less. Those in charge of government departments have greater prestige if their department is bigger, not smaller. There is no intrinsic motivation on the part of those employed by a government to cut back their oversight, but there is motivation to grow larger.

As a result, we can never be certain that a government agency will almost never police itself and make reductions when necessary. Certainly, some noble department and agency heads will do this, but they are indeed the exception. Similarly, politicians are rewarded with media coverage for demanding action – even where no action is warranted. Typically, this action involves more laws, more regulation and more oversight. And, sadly, removing laws and regulations is rarely a high priority in government.

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[39] State of Colorado, *Board of Dental Examiners Rules and Regulations*.

[40] This incident was the spark that brought about the Clean Air Act. Murray, Ann. *Smog Deaths In 1948 Led to Clean Air Laws*, npr.org, April 22, 2009.

[41] It is difficult to accurately judge the size of governmental growth. In terms of actual employees, the federal government changed little in 38 years from 1960 – 1998. On the other hand, state and local governments ballooned during that same period, up from 6.4 million to nearly 16 million. These figures, however, do not take into account fluctuations in the size of the military or the number of contract employees. (U.S. State Department, *Outline of the U.S. Economy*).

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Finally, the economic cost of government is asphyxiating. Government is, in general, not a wealth-creating enterprise. It is far more often a wealth-inhibiting endeavor. It takes money earned by the citizens and uses it for the good of all. But, in doing so, government removes resources that could be used for other purposes – and often that money is taken from the people who are the most skilled at building our economy.[42]

One solution to government overreach would be to have an impartial, outside examination of government spending. However, that would, in effect, create one more bureaucracy. A better solution is to limit the ability of government to reach into the taxpayers' pockets. By mandating the maximum amount a government can collect each year, there is a systemic mechanism that forces government to prune its own branches and use its dollars more wisely.

What should this limit on government income be? I don't know. But in theory, it should be the amount at which less government taxation would hurt the economy as equally as more government taxation. In all likelihood, there will be a standard percentage of GDP that would serve as a useful benchmark in making this determination.

At this point, it is probably worth quoting Calvin Coolidge. In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1925, he famously stated, "The business of America is business." What our 30th president understood was that the well-being of our nation rested in its economy, not its government. Without a healthy economy, government is incapable of making life for its citizens better. Therefore, it must be a prime goal of a nation's government to find ways to boost the economy of that nation. This requires wisdom to know when to intervene for the nation's good and when to stay out of the way. A democracy's top two tasks, then, should be to protect the liberty of its citizens and encourage the growth of a healthy, beneficial economy. In both cases, the best answer is typically to be found in smaller government, not larger.

The Juggernaut of Popular Culture

Do you know these people? Dr. Grigoriy Perelman, Percy Spencer, Robert Miller, Britney Spears, Brad Pitt. In all likelihood, you only recognized the last two names: Britney Spears and Brad Pitt. Here is some information about the others:

Dr. Grigoriy Perelman: Millennium Prize winner for solving the Poincaré Conjecture[43]
Percy Spencer: Inventor of the microwave oven[44]
Robert Miller: Medal of Honor winner, 2010 (posthumous)[45]

[42] Please note that I am not against social programs. However, having spent over 15 years working with the poor, I know that they do not need is programs that to maintain their *status quo*. The poor in our society generally need encouragement, accountability, motivation and the opportunity to change. It is very difficult work for them to change, and when we make their current situation too comfortable, we prevent their growth and steal their dignity. This tough-love assistance is typically accomplished more successfully by the non-profit sector than by the government.
[43] claymath.org
[44] ideafinder.com

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In today's world those whose contributions are most honorable and important generally go overlooked, while those who entertain us receive great acclaim. Is it any wonder that our children are more interested in being LeBron James than they are in emulating Edwin Hubble, the man who proved the existence of galaxies beyond the Milky Way?

This is no condemnation of Brad Pitt or Britney Spears, rather it is a condemnation of ourselves. We are more interested in those who make us laugh than in those who make us better. This is because we have lost our sense of value as a society. As morals have been lost and the idea of virtue cast aside, we have become a people who view all activities as not only permissible, but, in some bizarre way, equal in worth. There is no longer any sense that some things in our culture are good for us and others are not. Similarly, there is no motivation for people to better themselves because everything is seen as equally good. The idea of self-improvement is, sadly, an oddity in American society.

Instead, we drown ourselves in the equivalent of mental sugar and caffeine every day, watching the latest celebrity exploit or titillating video. Even the television news today consists far more of what will keep viewers' attention than of what really matters.

Long gone are the days when illiterate Jim Bridger, the famous mountain man, carried a copy of Shakespeare with him and even hired someone to read it to him. Also gone is the Shakespeare-saturated Old West – a place where de Tocqueville found "hardly a pioneer's hut which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare."[46]

This notion of improving one's self was not limited to the western plains. It has been a part of the American ethos up until the past two generations. In the early 20th century, for example, Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* became a smash best seller as people sought to become more educated. It is hard to imagine such a tome drawing much attention today. In fact, in my local library, all four copies are typically available for check-out at any time.

Granted, the drive toward self-improvement has never banished entertainment from life, nor should it. There has always been a significant part of news and culture that have catered to that which is interesting for its excitement, humor or titillation. We can see examples of this from Greek erotic pottery in 500 B.C.[47] to the popularity of the *Bob Hope Christmas Special* in the 1970's[48] to the massive press coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995, which, even only five years later, was referred to as "a monumental non-event."[49] I doubt anyone has ever expected *Masterpiece Theater* to garner quite the same viewing audience as Bob Hope.

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[45] Congressional Medal of Honor Society, mohs.org

[46] Van Orman, Richard A., *The Bard in the West*, The Western History Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 1, Jan. 1974, pp. 29-38.

[47] These include anatomically correct figures displayed in various compromising positions (as if you couldn't figure that out for yourself).

[48] 1970: 27.3 million viewers; 1971: 27.0 million viewers.

[49] Linder, Douglas, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law.

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However, the numbers of people involved in various aspects of culture are not, ultimately, the problem. The problem is a shift that occurred in America in the 1960's. Prior to that time, there was a fundamental understanding that some forms of culture were intrinsically better than others – that if a person wanted to better her or himself, there were some acknowledged elements of our culture that would benefit them. But that was soon to change.

Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*, produced in 1962, serve as just about as good a benchmark of this change as any. This piece of art came along just one year after Hannah Arendt's commentary in 1961 that "a market-driven media would lead to the displacement of culture by the dictates of entertainment."[50] From this point forward, opera was no longer better than rock and Warhol was no different than Picasso. In the democracy of popular culture, beauty was indeed in the eyes of the beholder and Nietzsche's self-centered understanding than man bestows beauty on creation became enthroned as true.[51] From then on, our culture would no longer accept the idea that one piece of art would ever be objectively better than any other.

This, then, is the juggernaut of popular culture. We have declared all art equal. None of it is better than any other. In accepting this egalitarian understanding of art, our culture may not have closed the door to the betterment of human character, but we no longer have any signs pointing the way. In effect, we have declared all people equal in quality as well as legal standing. And for those who see themselves in need of better character, we have removed the role of the arts in elevating humanity and building beauty into the souls of men.

For this reason, popular culture is a growing cancer facing America. Those in our population, whose vision for life goes little beyond the next Netflix delivery, feed the media machine, which, in turn, provides the same brain-numbing, time-filling entertainment day after day. It is a world of instant gratification where visual and aural stimulation shoots at us from every side.

This is, indeed, a far cry from Henri Nouwen sitting for hours at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg studying Rembrandt's 1662 painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, before he wrote his book of the same name.

In Nouwen's case, his use of art was something that lifted him up and filled him. In contrast, most of popular culture does not fill us. In fact, its main role is to distract us from our emptiness. Popular culture is the enemy of true art because it feeds on the same emptiness in man that true art seeks to fill.[52]

Unfortunately, we expect the same things from government that we expect from popular culture: immediate gratification, little effort on our part and low personal cost. It is this mentality that has helped raise the US national debt to over $14 trillion in 2011.

[50] Ardent, Hannah. "The Crisis in Culture," *Between Past and Future*, 1961.
[51] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols*.
[52] Granted, it is possible for true art to also be popular, but that is not the case the majority of the time.

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As of February 28, 2011, the total public debt owed by the US government was $14.19 trillion. That means that each one of the people of the United States is obligated to pay over $48,000 in debt incurred by their government.

How did this happen? How could our country incur a debt that is almost equivalent to its GDP? Obviously, there are numerous answers and explanations to this problem. Suffice to say, the economic crisis, wars overseas and the need to maintain vital programs have all contributed. However, other issues have set the stage for this drama to be acted out.

Bureaucratic Opposition. As discussed earlier, there is little, if any, cost-cutting momentum within a bureaucracy.

Political Costs. Politicians survive in office by keeping a majority their constituents happy. They shy away from making difficult decisions, knowing that they may pay for it in the end.[53] It appears to be the *modus operandi* of a democracy to punish the courageous at the time and only honor them in the future.

A great example of this is the pardoning of Richard Nixon by Gerald Ford. While the pardon certainly cost Ford victory in the next election, in hindsight even Senator Ted Kennedy (who opposed the pardon) recognized Ford's wisdom.[54] With a few courageous exceptions, most politicians seek to stay in office, so they make their decisions with an eye to the voting booth. As a result, our political leaders are loath to cut back on any programs because of the hue and cry that could be raised by one special interest group or another. Therefore, the political cost of scaling back government spending is often more than a politician is willing to pay – especially when there is great political benefit to government spending.

Political Benefit. If voters in an area see political leaders bringing money into their towns or favorite programs, they are more likely to support those leaders. Unfortunately, this makes for an extremely poor fiscal policy. Taken to its logical conclusion, the decision by voters to continue to pursue their own, narrow self-interests, will mean the demise of the American democracy - not by outside military invasion, but by the slow process of economic collapse. Or, as someone once stated: "The American Republic will endure, until politicians realize they can bribe the people with their own money."[55] Using the public coffers to stay in power is nothing new. We saw it in Ancient Rome in the form of the *congiarium*, which amounted to the distribution of free or, more often, price-subsidized corn.[56]

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[53] Pun intended.
[54] President Ford later received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage award for his decision.
[55] This is a paraphrase of a quote often attributed to either Alexander Tytler or Alexis de Tocqueville. The quotation cannot be certainly attributed to either gentleman.
[56] Smith, William, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 1859.

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Government Antipathy. There has been throughout our history a significant number of people who, for a variety of reasons, would prefer to not be involved in government and wish that government would accord them the same treatment. It was no accident that Esek Hopkins, the first commander-in-chief of the Colonial Navy, carried a flag with the motto, "Don't Tread on Me," as his personal standard for his flagship.[57] The politically avoidant tend to stay away from politics unless they see something happening that they perceive as significantly wrong. Until then, they give government free reign with little genuine accountability (although they still retain the right to complain as much or as often as they want).

Political Expectations. One of the most critical questions a democracy must answer is, "What is the scope of government? How much should a government do?" The Founding Fathers attempted to define governmental limits through the 10th Amendment, which reads, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." In other words, the framers of the Constitution wanted the federal government's powers to stay within set boundaries.[58] This was their attempt to limit the power of the federal government.[59]

Unfortunately, the problem of keeping government within its limits has more to do with the expectations of the people than any nuanced arguments concerning Constitutional interpretation. Simply put, those who expect a lot *of* government, expect to receive a lot *from* government.

It is now about 45 years since LBJ championed the cause of the Great Society, with its emphasis on eliminating poverty and racism, and boosting education, healthcare and the arts. Out of his efforts, sweeping legislation was enacted. The Great Society gave us the Job Corps, VISTA,[60] Food Stamps, Project Head Start, an expanded Social Security Program, Medicare, Medicaid, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and many more agencies and programs. Certainly, the legacy of the Great Society has been a mixed bag, with proponents and opponents lobbing factoid hand grenades across the trenches at each other.

One unarguable aspect of the Great Society, though, is its cost. In 2010, Social Security cost us about $706 billion; Medicaid, $290 billion; Medicare $446 billion; Job Corps, $1.7 billion; Corporation for Public Broadcasting, $420 million; National Endowment for the Arts, $167.5 million; Head Start, $7.2 billion; Food Stamps, $68.7 billion, for a total of over $1.5 trillion

[57] This is the famous Gadsden flag. It was presented to Hopkins by Christopher Gadsden in 1775.
[58] It has been noted that the 10th Amendment does not place any limits on the federal government that are not already stated elsewhere. What is missed in this off-hand dismissal of the amendment is that it serves as an exclamation point concerning to Founding Fathers' determination to keep the federal government and its powers within tightly prescribed limits.
[59] In practice, the 10th Amendment has been of little effect. The courts have generally sided with the concept of greater power for the federal government, as is shown in their limited enforcement of this amendment and virtually unlimited use of the commerce clause (Article I, Section 8, Clause 3) to create a broad range of federal powers that were never stated in the Constitution.
[60] Volunteers in Service to America, a domestic Peace Corps.

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(almost 42% of our national budget - and these are only some of the elements of the Great Society).[61] Clearly, our own experience shows that government social programs cost a lot of money, money that our government does not even have.

The greatest drawback of the Great Society is not fiscal, however. The biggest problem is that it has created two generations of Americans who now take these programs for granted and expect that the provision of such assistance is a necessary and essential function of government. This is a disastrous understanding of the role of government because when personal responsibilities become individual rights, taxes increase, economies suffer and liberties are lost.

And so, in a country where personal debt is almost equal to an entire year's gross domestic product and where what used to be our responsibilities are owed to us by others, it should not surprise us that our citizens show little concern for national debt.[62] Granted, the American people have a long history of debt - our revolution from Britain was even funded by it.[63]

But there has been a distinct change with regard to the American attitude toward debt. In the past, debt was often incurred, but it was considered a bad thing. The acceptable use of money in past generations is best summed up in John Wesley's phrase, "Having, first, gained all you can, and, secondly saved all you can, then give all you can."[64] Today, however, incurring debt is not only seen as acceptable, but unavoidable. Our mindset looks for immediate gratification with little effort on our part and at a low personal cost. Therefore, thinking only of our own immediate desires, we build up debt, piling it on the altar of self at the expense of future generations.

And so, we come by our $14 trillion debt honestly. Our political system rewards overspending; the government bureaucracy promotes wasteful spending; and we accept debt with little fuss, preferring to tighten our lips instead of our belts.

Conclusion

America has a difficult road ahead. If we are to survive, we must forge a new economy in a shrinking world. This economy must be based on wealth creation and not merely wealth distribution. To succeed, we must also bring our massive public debt back under control or we will face an economic collapse that will mean the eventual end of prosperity for our nation. This means that government must, inexorably, be made smaller and more focused in its purpose.

Unfortunately, the deeper problem facing our nation is not economic or political. Our economic and political struggles are merely symptoms of a profound lack of character among our people – and especially among our leaders. We have refused to do what is difficult or painful because we

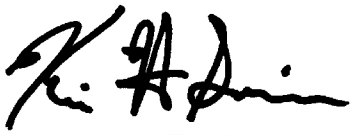
[61] Figures from, variously, the Government Accounting Office, Department of Labor, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Endowment for the Arts, New York Times.
[62] Buttonwood [sic], "World debt," economist.com, June 24, 2010.
[63] Ferguson, E. James, *The Power of the Purse: A History of American Public Finance, 1776-1790*.
[64] Wesley, John. Sermon 50: "The Use of Money," *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M*. (1840).

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worship at the altar of self-gratification. Our popular culture has made everything equal and defined all things as equally good. In doing so, we have rejected the notions of human betterment, of right and wrong, and of character over comfort. In effect, we have slammed the door to our only sure way of escape from the mess our nation is in.

What can we do?

Perhaps the single best answer is to promote, once again, the concepts of morality, nobility and virtue in our nation. Let us build into the next generations the values of hard work and self-discipline that are so lacking in our country today. In doing this, our economic recovery (which will come in time) will be passed on to a generation that will again have the character to use and maintain it wisely.



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