

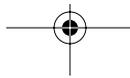
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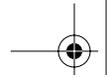
WHAT IS WRONG WITH AMERICA?



In answer to the question, “What is wrong with America?” some might have trouble finding any flaw while others would need hours, if not days, to begin to enumerate all the problems they perceive. Surely, America is not without faults. But what good can come from dwelling on or overemphasizing its weaknesses?

Physical scientists are currently searching for a solution to one of the greatest problems in the history of physics: a “unified” theory that will simplify our understanding of our universe by combining our knowledge of electrical, nuclear, and gravitational forces into one single equation. Some physicists have gone as far as to hint that when this work is completed, it will signal the end of science.

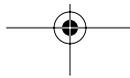


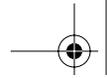


In the political and economic research arena, there is also a great effort under way to understand how the peoples of the world can better work and live together on this planet. There is hope for a global unified theory that might help explain a great deal about how people the world over productively organize themselves because many questions of economics and governance are the same everywhere in the world. Also, humans are much more similar around the world than we like to admit. We all want to live full, meaningful lives, we wish to make a contribution in our lives, and we want to be free. Why freedom and individual choice are so appealing to humans is beyond the scope of this book, but the desire also appears to be universal. Certainly there are cultural and ethnic differences around the planet, but "..., in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal" (John F. Kennedy).

And so what is this common unifying force that might solve many of America's and the world's economic, societal, and governmental problems? It is greater democracy! By world standards, America is far from being the least democratic of the countries on earth, but examination of its current problems suggests that greater democracy may help solve many of its most intractable problems. Greater democracy in America means greater and more direct involvement by the American people in their government, a dramatic reduction in the undue influence of special interests that distort the democratic governance process and guarantees that the free press and basic civil liberties will be protected.

It has long been understood that democracy, at least theoretically, provides a country's citizens with tremendous individual freedom. Democracy, it turns out, also has a very important role to play in establishing and maintaining a healthy and prosperous economy. Economies grow when people invest in businesses, their



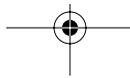


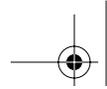
families, and their education. And a necessary precondition for investment is good government that can ensure that fair and just rules are set as to how economic activity develops. It turns out that democracy's value to an economy is in policing the government to ensure it not only sets fair rules of play for the economy but that the government itself does not become coercive toward its citizens. So an investigation of America's problems is not meant to demean the country, but rather to uncover opportunities it might undertake to attain even greater economic and cultural accomplishments and restore it to its proper place as the beacon of freedom and opportunity to all the peoples of the world.

Many Americans today might consider it unpatriotic for their fellow citizens to publicly criticize the policies of their government. Especially in war time, it is commonly thought that good citizens should stand behind their commander-in-chief and allow him or her to speak with one unified voice.

Antiwar protestors during the Vietnam conflict were told that with regard to America they should either "love it or leave it." But times have changed. Different Americans have drawn different conclusions about how that war was fought; some hawks have decided we could have won the war if only we had let the generals fight it. Many Americans believe it was a mistake to get involved from the start, and many of those consider it an immoral war.

At the time, it was hard to tell which side held the moral high ground. Wars are always bloody events, so arguing morals in the middle of an essentially amoral affair is rather difficult. But with hindsight, most people now agree that the antiwar protestors were right. Dominoes or no dominoes, America probably had very little business fighting in a small country's civil war halfway around the world. Interestingly, anyone who visits the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., on any given day may witness a remarkable event—former soldiers from the conflict in bear hugs with former

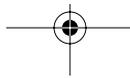


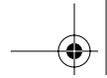


Vietnam War protesters. It appears that even our former troops have come to appreciate the role played by the antiwar activists in getting them home safely to their families and loved ones.

During the recent Iraq War, the American administration again began to argue that any dissent or criticism of the government was not only harmful to the cause but a sign of disloyalty to the nation. To crush dissent during conflicts seems to violate some of the fundamental rights that America as a democratic nation fights for—the freedoms of assembly, association, and speech. It is during critical periods like wars that a democratic government should be most attentive to the wishes of its populace. Only the general citizenry can give its leaders essential feedback regarding their perception of the morality of the conflict, the acceptable levels of human loss and suffering they are willing to endure, and when, if ever, is an appropriate time to sue for peace. Generals, presidents, and other elected representatives are often too close to the operational aspects of the conflict and may have developed a “win at any cost” mentality, as combatants often do. Only the general populace can maintain a “big picture” perspective and properly weigh the true costs and benefits of the war since it is their sons and daughters who are being put in harm’s way. Therefore, it is essential that the general populace be well informed by an unbiased and independent media and maintain a strong voice in their government.

Now, in the post-Iraq War world, one finds that the conflict is not over. It is said that the battle against terrorism has no finish line and that again, criticism of the administration harms the cause against the enemy. The FBI has collected extensive information on antiwar protestors in America, arguing in an FBI memorandum that it is trying to suppress terrorism. (*The New York Times*, 11/23/03). The use of the scare word “terrorists” to attack the civil liberties of people participating in democratic protests concerns many in America. It very well may be that the war on terrorism will be

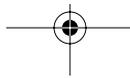


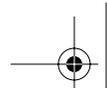


endless, but does this mean that Americans must forever cease their criticism of their government?

The American military emerged from Vietnam with a doctrine of not entering a new war without very well-defined goals, clear objectives, and a definitive time frame in which to end hostilities. And now, generals have been drawn into a war on terror that knows no country boundaries, has a very poorly defined enemy, and has objectives so muddy that it is inconceivable the conflict will ever end. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote in a memo to his staff in October 2003 concerning the never-ending Iraq clean-up operation, the U.S. was spending billions while the enemies, the so-called terrorists, were spending millions. He added, for every enemy we kill, hundreds more are successfully recruited to the terrorist cause (*The New York Times*, 10/24/03). If you agree that no weapons of mass destruction were found, Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11, and world opinion has shifted dramatically against the United States, it is starting to look as if the antiwar crowd was right again. If the objective was to minimize terrorist activity in the world, nobody better claim “mission accomplished” anytime soon.

So in the spirit of everything that is good and patriotic and democratic in the act of protesting and criticizing one’s government, it is time to cry out that something is terribly wrong with America. Although the war is a striking example of this, this treatise goes far beyond the battlefields of war to examine a number of other problems in America. Those Americans who feel there is something wrong and say nothing are the ones who should be labeled unpatriotic. To see problems in America that are serious enough to cause her harm and do nothing is almost seditious, if the definition of sedition could be stretched for these purposes to include intentional inactivity in the face of an impending threat to the country.



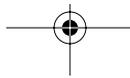


Many Americans feel in their hearts that something is not quite right with their country. They see a wide variety of problems that are not being addressed properly by the government and wonder if something is fundamentally wrong with America itself. Much has been made of the government's inability or lack of desire to deal effectively with an extremely volatile economy, the lack of good new jobs being created, real wages that haven't grown for decades, our declining schools, exploding health care costs, a broken Social Security system, and poverty at home and abroad.

A third-party perspective might be helpful for understanding the depth of this problem, and polling people from other countries can provide that perspective. Researchers have found that 11 out of the 12 countries polled for both periods viewed the U.S. less favorably in 2003 than in 2002 (see Table 1.1). The only exception was Pakistan, which saw the percentage of its people that viewed the U.S. favorably increase during the period, but from a modest 10% to an underwhelming 13% (Pew Global Attitudes Project as reported in *The New York Times* 9/11/03). Without identifying potential causes, such a poll should act as a warning that indeed something has changed for the worse in America.

If you ask a variety of Americans what is wrong, they will identify several different symptoms, which at first appear to be the result of completely different problems. Upon further review, however, one can argue that these varying signs of decay are the result of one overriding issue—the demise of democracy. Such a statement is very bold indeed, because such symptoms of a sick society are very far-reaching and affect Americans at home with their families, at work, and in their relationships with the other countries of the world.

Various people would likely compile different lists of potential problems in America and surely would rank them differently, but an extremely important phenomenon is the feeling of many Americans



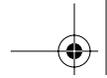
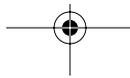


Table 1.1 Respondents Who Viewed America Favorably by Country, July 2002 and July 2003 (%)

	July 2002	July 2003
Brazil	52	34
Britain	75	70
Canada	72	63
France	63	43
Germany	61	45
Indonesia	61	15
Israel	NA	79
Italy	70	60
Morocco	NA	27
Nigeria	77	61
Pakistan	10	13
Russia	61	36
South Korea	53	46
Turkey	30	15

Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project as reported in *The New York Times*, 9/11/03

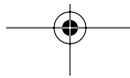
that they are all alone. As Robert Putnam has shown in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Americans spend far more of their free time in individual pursuits than they did in the 1950s. Americans used to spend many more hours with other people, whether it was at their children's ballgames, Girl Scout and Boy Scout meetings, religious socials, neighborhood get-togethers, or even the local pub. Americans have become wedded to their cars, and with both parents in many families working, there is precious little time for people to attend, much less socialize after, a child's ballgame. Their suburbs are full of big houses that they retreat to each evening and from which they rarely venture out other than to rent a movie or pick up some ice cream, again in the car. The fundamental principle behind any successful community is trust—something terribly lacking in America today.

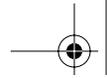




An astute reader might argue that a weakening democracy in America, rather than causing these feelings of isolation and loneliness, may actually result because people wish to spend more time by themselves. Certainly it is more difficult to build and maintain an effective and cooperative democratic government if people do not want to become involved with others. While this is a possibility, the cause and effect in such relationships have a tendency to reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. Less community spirit engenders a weakening in democratic institutions, which further weakens the community, and so on. Change can most easily be introduced at the governmental institution level, so the focus will be on increasing democracy in hopes it has therapeutic effects on some of the ailments suffered in America's communities. If this approach is unsuccessful, more work should be done on Americans' desires to be alone. Fish rot from the head, and if Americans have lost faith in their neighbors, it might be a result of their first having lost faith in their governmental and business leaders. A more democratic, less corrupt, more deliberative, and more cooperative government can act only as a positive role model in inspiring Americans to get out more and enjoy each other's company more.

The next symptom that something might be seriously wrong with America also involves trust—or rather a general distrust of authority figures, especially in the federal government. The federal government is often targeted as the most untrustworthy, but many people are suspicious of all those in power, including state and local government bureaucrats, big company executives, bankers, lawyers, and even priests and doctors. Trust is essential in building cooperative efforts with government organizations, but if government fails its people often enough, the result can be an evaporation of trust in these institutions. Greater democracy is the key to stimulating greater trust in our elected representatives.



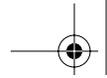


Americans are apathetic, or so they are told by their elected representatives. Indeed, there is data in support of this claim. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (November 2003), 50% of eligible Americans did not vote in the 2000 presidential elections. This statistic may be not a measure of American voters' apathy, but rather a sign of their refusal to participate in and support a corrupt political system. Again, greater democracy can help control corruption in a country and in so doing encourage greater participation in governing by its citizens.

Many Americans feel that their government is terribly out of touch with their immediate needs. They look at their job situation, their mortgage payments, their children's dilapidated schools, their long daily commutes through rush-hour traffic, their poor access to adequate health care, their bankrupt Social Security and Medicare systems, and the number of American families still living in poverty and wonder why their government doesn't do something. The government, it turns out, is doing something, just not for them. The government is passing income tax breaks for the richest Americans, eliminating the inheritance tax for the wealthiest, granting subsidies for big business, allowing the formation of monopolies and permitting multinational corporations to relocate offshore. By relocating, off-shore companies take jobs with them and avoid regulations having to do with minimum wages, work conditions, unionization, taxation, environmental protection, and worker safety. So it is not that your government is not hard at work; it just isn't working for you.

It is not lost on many Americans that corporations have become extremely powerful. Now that nearly two-thirds of married women work (Talbot, 2003), more Americans than ever spend their lives at the office, many working hard for big corporations. But corporations have moved beyond the economic arena and are now active players in the government. They are the biggest





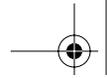
contributors to America's political parties and spend the most on lobbying the government (visit www.publiccampaign.org and www.commoncause.org). The Supreme Court in December 2003 affirmed a new campaign finance law, but it does not go far enough in getting corporations out of our government (*The New York Times*, 12/11/03).

It is a fact that America's wealthiest have gotten much richer over the last 20 years while its poor and middle class have stagnated. Real wages have remained almost flat for the last 25 years (Krugman, 2003). Trickle-down economics has turned out to be trickle-up economics. Besides raising questions about the fairness and justice of such a trickle-up system for this as well as the next generation, trickle-up economics also causes a fundamental problem in the way goods and services in the economy are allocated, especially those that everyone ought to have access to. It is much harder to support a free market system for delivering medical care if the richest fifth of the country's population has nine times the average income of the poorest fifth, which is the ratio in America (Roll and Talbott, 2002).

In the area of international relations, many Americans are puzzled about why their government ends up befriending, supporting, and arming so many dictators, especially as they inevitably seem to turn those same weapons back on Americans. America seems to be on the wrong side of the "dictator vs. the people" battle in many countries including in much of the Arab world, many African countries, some of the former Soviet Republics, Pakistan and China. Why isn't America the beacon of democracy in the world? Who benefits from prolonging dictatorships that are starving their countries' people and preventing healthy economies from developing?

Americans mistakenly believe that approximately 10% of the U.S. government's budget goes to aiding the poor and impoverished of the world. According to the World Bank, the real figure



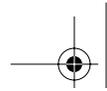


was less than .1% for 2002, and many authors have suggested that these loans and grants have harmed, not helped, development worldwide (Easterly, 2001). Americans are a very generous people. Why is their government so stingy with foreign aid and why is this aid so ineffective in helping the poor people of the world escape poverty? Here introducing democratic reforms might serve double duty. If greater democracy in America leads to greater involvement of its people, the world may find that Americans are indeed much more generous and caring than their government appears to be. It is also true that if more developing countries enact democratic reforms, they should grow faster economically and, in time, help their people out of poverty (Roll and Talbott 2003; this research paper is cited often in this text and is included in the back as an appendix). Perhaps aid to developing countries can be redirected to helping them establish good democratic and other important governmental institutions and then allow these countries to make their own decisions regarding economics and governance.

There is another troubling symptom that something is wrong in America. America's media have gone through an amazing transformation over the last 30 years. There has been a great corporate consolidation not only in the television industry, but also among radio stations, newspapers, and entertainment companies (McChesney, 2000). This change has undoubtedly resulted in greater operating efficiencies for the providers of news and entertainment, but what is the impact on the democratic form of government of allowing the free press to be controlled by a few, very powerful corporations? One of the cornerstones of any well-functioning democracy is a free and independent press. Has America sold its down the river?

To summarize, America has its problems. They seem to be getting worse, and they are not being addressed by the government. If ignored, they will fester until they endanger America and its people.





Before possible solutions can be suggested, the problems themselves have to be well understood. Then, and only then, can the American people come to the necessary consensus to move forward and institute real democratic reform.

The primary reform suggested here is a dramatic reduction, if not elimination, of the undue and unfair influence special interests have in the government. By far, the largest of these privileged groups that should be restricted in their political activities are our largest corporations. Their campaign contributions should stop and their lobbying activities cease. The wealthy also have far too much say in how our government runs. But there are other parties that have too much influence in Washington, and to ensure that every American's voice is heard, their influence also needs curbing. Each of us is a member of at least one special interest group. We are the elderly, we are environmentalists, we are union members, we are gun owners, we are lawyers, and we are doctors. But first we are Americans. Until we look past the immediate gains from narrowly crafted legislation written to benefit our special interest, we must ask the more fundamental question, "Is it good for America?" And once we learn to ask this question, we can ask the next: "Is it good for humanity?" In this spirit, do not be offended if this text attacks your favorite special interest; the book tries to demonstrate its impartiality and lack of bias by attacking every special interest. Just remember that with an American spirit of hard work, dedication, devotion, and cooperation, we will conquer these problems and put America back on the path to greater enlightenment and fulfillment for its citizens.

