

It's Us or Them — And It's Now or Never

by Doug Dowd

In the past 50 years “We the People” in the USA have been politically active only in 1933–36 and 1948–1968. In those few years We the People were seeking to move the nation toward becoming democratic — a democracy in fact, not merely in name. Prompted by The Great Depression, the brief 1930's effort transformed economic desperation into political action and some progress. After the war years and the rest of the 1940s, the efforts were assisted by both the growth of unions (during the war) and the temporary political relaxation of Big Business, as it wallowed in its massive war profits. (Dowd, 2000)

In the 1970s, when the business world saw what was happening, it sharpened its political knives and went to work on We the People. Did we notice? Those of us who once were politically active — almost all of us — have spent more time fighting amongst ourselves than in slugging it out with our common enemy. Or we have been more involved in buying and borrowing than in the messy and often ungratifying sphere of politics. Today's shift toward hyper-conservative politics has now spread and deepened to the point where, unless we get to work politically right away, we will be on our way toward an Americanized variation of fascism. It's now or never for We the People.

In late summer of this year (more than symbolized by “Occupy Wall Street”) the people of one after another city became politically active. That freneticism must continue, deepen, and spread. For us to survive, it must become a consciously national effort, as though we were fighting a war. And

indeed we are: a class war, a political war. In the USA, this will be the final struggle. If We the People lose now, the country (counting only those still alive and not imprisoned) will be a totalitarian shell of itself. Ten thousand activists (my estimate of some five years ago) will be incarcerated, deported, or lose their health (or life) to the military in a Guantanamo setting. The rest will be tolerated, distracted, and cowed. As one US-approved-and-installed dictator put it, “I don’t want citizens, I want sheep!”

That’s what the dictator got, too. For a while. Noam Chomsky notes, striking abject fear into the hearts of people works. Murder, torture, rape, imprisonment work wonders to produce sheep. For a while. Until enough people lose their rational, innate fear of death and decide to just go for it. Oppression works very well until for enough people dying on one’s feet becomes preferable to living on one’s knees.

A lot of banana republic-style brutality may not be necessary in the USA. The rulers [whoever they turn out to be] really would prefer to keep the peace with mandatory crosses, enforced flag-waving, and bread [well, crumbs] and video circuses. Fascism with a friendly face. Big Brother may look like the friendly strangers on television “news.”

But in the meantime, the war — our war. Our struggle is essential. And it is personally satisfying — especially to those look into the mirror and ask, who are you, anyway?

In recent years the business world and its supporters have become always more politicized; we must do likewise and outdo them. If we do not organize and gain the political strength essential to move toward a better

society, we will be leaving the door wide open for an ever-deepening political disaster.

PERSONAL SIDEBAR

Who's talking? Before I got caught up in World War II, I had done jobs of all kinds: janitor, typist, court reporter (having become exceptionally proficient at shorthand), and hospital worker (while going back to school). Later, at graduate student at U.C. Berkeley, I was a teaching assistant. When I finished those studies, I was placed on the faculty at U.C., thence to Cornell, back to California and (each half of every year) teaching there and in Italy. My political involvements have been mostly against our constant wars and racism.

The focus in what follows will be mostly upon the USA, with some attention to ongoing and worsening global dangers. The politics of the USA have always been strongly dominated by a minority, which owns and controls the means of production. In recent years the composition of the ruling economic minority has changed greatly. In our beginnings as a nation, those who dominated politically were a combination of landowners, slave owners, merchants, and bankers. After the Civil War, the structure of power was narrowed: industrialists and bankers. That was bad enough. But now the industrialists are going or gone, and political power has become

dominated by the gamblers on Wall Street and their bosom buddies in the military-industrial complex.

Wall Street's USA

Since the 1970s the structure of both economic and political power has come to be dominated by finance and, to make matters worse, by its increasingly powerful gambling sector. In those same years the Republican Party has increasingly bowed to its ascendant far-right wing. Along the way, almost all of the elected Democratic politicians, not to mention their Republican rivals, have been bought and paid for by elements of the business sector. Whether it's oil and connected wars for access, the undoing [privatizing, reducing or eliminating] of already weak socio-economic programs, or poisoning the environment more than ever, US politicians are the best that Big Business money can buy.

Meanwhile, as legislators at all levels have either abetted or simply allowed corruption to rule, too many of us who in the past worked for a better world have ceased to participate politically, except for exchanging insults, a facile superficiality that nourishes conservatives, the far right, and the military. Yet if there is to be a reversal of our current dangerous and unstable situation, there must be a substantial increase of political participation by us. We the People need to work hard and to cooperate with those who are *not* on the Right to shift political power *away* from the Right. If and when we do so and move toward a *non-right-wing* government, only then can we (afford to) resume the habitual infighting of the Left.

Right now, however, we must do two things. First, we need to realize that our political enemies are on the Right. We need in-group solidarity. They

are The Other and we can have no accord with them. Likewise, we should remind ourselves that our allies (if only for a while) are all those who are anywhere from center to Left — or who are just plain decent (which is to say, not of the Right). And that's *all* of those as our allies, not just the ones we are personally fond of. This is to be work, not a love affair.

Second, with our friend v. foe outlook in place, we have to rouse both ourselves and others on our side who were once politically active to get going again. And for the political neophytes, our job is to show that now is the time to take the plunge.

As I wrote those words, my memory jumped back to how much time, energy, and emotion we spent in the mid-1930s (when I was in my teens) and then again in the post-World War II years (when I was in my thirties); how much progress was made in both periods and, not much later, how easily it began to be reversed.

That was then. From this day forward we must work together to repeat and go beyond those early gains. We have a lot of work to do. Much of it can be gratifying and pleasant, some of it annoying and harsh. But all of it is worth doing: We have a lot to get rid of and a lot to bring to life.

The unconstrained trajectory, which is to say, the natural tendency of modern capitalism (unless held back by a popular movement) is disastrous. Its default mission is to foster high unemployment, social indecency, imperialism and permanent wars, and to ignore an endangered environment as irrelevant. (Capitalists don't care about "collateral damage," whether it's people or the planet itself.) Everything is at its worst when the government

is run by conservatives, which it has been more often than not since World War II — no matter who is in the White House. (Brady, 1943; 2001)

US politicians, including presidents, would not have kowtowed to the conservatives and continued to do so if We the People had lived up to our political standards with sustained political work. We have not, and in sitting back and complaining instead of getting up and organizing we have opened wide the doors for an increasingly dangerous and sickening rich men's and war lovers' country. (Bacevich)

What We Must Work For

Our aim should be to have a genuinely democratic society, but as I have tried to hammer home here (and in many other places), that is not an attainable goal unless a large percentage of us become politically involved immediately. And even if we do become politically involved in great numbers — yes, even beginning right now, today — it is unlikely that such a fine society can be achieved in the near future.

But all is not lost. Our serious and sustained efforts will produce a better society without untoward delay and lay the foundation to something truly decent. The world can be a better place. We can see to it. Wouldn't working for such a desirable society be considerably more pleasing than simply grunting at what we have now?

Since the very beginnings of the USA, most of us have accepted as real democracy what was in fact a dominating plutocracy. But the ruling elite — Big Business — has spent billions upon billion of dollars since the 1920s to assure us that their way is best for everybody. And they have closed us —

We the People — out of the political system. Our only power is to ratify their pre-selected ballot choices. We don't even get to vote for None of the Above. It's the Big Business way or the highway. (Ralph Nader knows.)

The political reality we must face and deal with now is the most dangerous in human history, both domestically and internationally. Those who have taken us here have faced no significant resistance. Without a strong political movement, they will ruin us all (and themselves, too) — and do it by default.

As I write in late 2011, protest movements around the nation have taken hold, most famously OWS — Occupy Wall Street. The protests now underway are most welcome and important, but it is vital that they become the beginnings of a *national* movement working for decency at home and peace abroad. If it comes about, the national movement will work toward a place that finally, will be governed “by and for the people.”

In this regard, there are several matters the movement will have to take up.

The Economy

In what follows we will examine several issues regarding the economy:

1. Recession
2. Financial dominance
3. the USA and the rest of the world: (a) the exploiters and (b) the exploited
4. Inequality
5. Taxes (Also see Baran and Sweezy.)

The USA became the history's richest society in history by virtue of its abundant natural resources, its ocean-protected location (up to World War II), and its uniquely diverse population. That the enormous U.S. territory and its abundant natural resources were murderously if not in fact genocidally stolen from the native peoples has been forgotten, ignored, or excused.

1. Recession — Then and Now

There is a worrisome similarity between today's recession and the one that began in 1929 and became The Great Depression. With an intermission of 3-to-4 years, the Great Depression went on and on, until it was finally pushed aside by World War II. The harshness of the depression years prompted — for a while — what became honest and strong labor unions, the most dramatic and most successful of which came about in 1934 in my home town of San Francisco. Its fight was both against the corruption of its existing union and the cruelties of the ship owners. (The fight was repeated in New York later, becoming the basis for the film *On the Waterfront*.) That period and its struggles left some lessons, some of which are relevant to our present condition and our worth a brief summary.

When the stock market in New York crashed in 1929, the bosses announced it would soon recover. Instead, from 1929 on, 9 thousand banks and 9 million (!) savings accounts failed and unemployment rose (officially) from 9 percent to 25 percent. Nonetheless, then as now, we were frequently reminded, "Prosperity is just around the corner." Wall Street was dominating the economy and a good chunk of the government. As business continued to fall and unemployment to rise, unrest took hold. And the clamor grew dramatically and effectively (of which the general strike in San

Francisco was but an example). The depression, which was still called “recession” by both Wall Street and the government, meant that already inadequate jobs and sweatshop wages would spread and worsen, and they did until pushed aside by war.

PERSONAL SIDEBAR

I was just 10 when The Crash hit, living with my divorced and low-waged mother (whose formal education had stopped at the 8th grade). In my early teens I delivered newspapers and cleaned houses. I became politically sensitive after a dockworker strike prompted by murderous ship owners. For fun, I joined the workers’ parade, not knowing that the coffins they were carrying were of dockworkers who had been who had been killed the day before by men hired by the ship owners. That day I got an education and became political. I’ve had very few victories, but it has been a good life and I would love to do again.

There are, of course, many differences between then and now, but on balance they are far from encouraging. Here’s an overview. (Rasmus; Reich)

1. The world economy in the interwar period was much smaller than today’s, and it became even smaller as all but the UK and the USA fell under fascism. That was then.

2. Both world wars strengthened the USA and greatly weakened all of the other main powers. But there was rebuilding. Since the 1970s, not only have the European and British participants become stronger, but several other ex-imperialized societies (led by China, India, and Brazil) have gained, as meanwhile the USA has lurched toward becoming history's largest borrower.

3. There are serious reasons to fear that in the near future the presently "stronger" nations will also soften or worse, for the strength of the newcomers (notably, China, India, and Brazil) is dependent upon a healthy (that is, strong) world economy. If the USA shudders to a halt, the presently strong newcomer economies will soon spiral down and join the sad parade.

4. The USA can't continue on its merry way. It now owes six *trillion* dollars to the rest of the world, almost half of which to China and India. Sometime soon, world lenders will have to face up to the ugly fact that their gargantuan sales to the USA ("the buyer of last resort") cannot continue without more loans — and that outstanding loans cannot be paid back. Then what? One can only guess, but we can be sure that the ongoing high trade of the world economy is on its way to a collapse.

2. Finance, the Fickle Dominatrix

If you were born before 1970, you will remember that the financial world, whether in the USA or elsewhere, was the home of conservatism, both economic and political. Politically, it remains assuredly conservative, but economically it is well on its way to outdoing Las Vegas as the gambling center of the USA (and the world). Profits from the financial sector now account for over 30 percent of *total* corporate earnings; in 1950, the figure was 8 percent.

The U.S. economy is now utterly dominated by finance. Of even greater concern is that the financial sector is dominated by *speculation*. And this massive papa-needs-new-shoes crap shoot is itself ruled over by grossly overpaid executives. For them it's great fun, and it yields monstrous incomes.

But at what cost? Speculation contributes *nothing* but troubles to society. Until recently, the financial sector served a vital "lubricating" function, much as simple loans did in the deep past. However, as the 20th century moved on, economies came to be seen as inconceivable without crowded networks of financial institutions. In *this* new century, transportation and communications technologies have made intricate, even incomprehensible, financial instruments both more common and more dangerous.

Such behavior has gone to such extremes that the admired financial expert Soros (made a billionaire by his own investments) has recently commented that we have been taken into "the midst of a financial crisis the likes of which we haven't seen since the Great Depression." (Soros)

Will we get out of the present financial mess or will we, as we did in the '30s depression allow Wall Street to run the show? Will we ever have "our" government see to it that Wall Street is put under reasonable control? Will the Street once again be regulated by the rules established after the depression and swept away (by Clinton & Co.) in the 1990s? As things now stand, the answer is no.

As Thomas Friedman pointed out in a recent article: "Our financial industry has grown so large and rich it has corrupted our real institutions through political donations." And he quotes Sen. Durbin of Illinois: "Despite

having caused this crisis, these same financial firms are still the most powerful lobby on Capital Hill. And they, frankly, own the place.” “The One About Bankers” (*NYT*, 2011-10-11)

You can't say we weren't warned. From a 1995 governmental report:

In 1949, corporate profits of *non*-financial companies were 10 times as high as those of financial companies; in 1959, 5 times as high; in 1969 2 and a half times, in 1979j less than double; but since 1989 *non*-financial corporate profits have always been *less* financial companies. (*Economic Report of the President*, 1995)

The foregoing treatment of the financial world is troubling enough. Add to that the ongoing dimensions and dangers of household *debt*. Here's a warning taken from *Business Week* a decade ago. Household debt as a share of disposable income rose from 62 percent to 102 percent in 1999; financial sector debt as a share of GDP more than quadrupled from under 20 percent to 90 percent, and U.S. foreign debt more than doubled, from \$1 trillion to over \$2.5 trillion.

That was then. Now the 1999 \$2.5 trillion has become \$6 trillion (almost half of which is owed to China and India). So let's see who's doing what to whom...

3. The USA and the Rest of the World

a. The Exploiters Although the USA freed itself politically from Britain and others soon after the end of the 18th century, it was another century

before it became truly independent economically. Up to the 1890s U.S. imperialism was exercised intra continentally — that is, internally, against the lands of the natives. Finally we joined the classic imperialist club and began our countless attempts to take over fertile — and militarily strategic — lands in all directions. This endless power grab was facilitated by the weakness of all but ourselves after World War II.

Since then the USA has had two quite different imperializing periods and many wars. (Dobb) and [See (3):“Wars.”] In the first of those two periods, 1945-to-1970, Uncle Sam was king of all he surveyed, because all of the major (and most of the minor) countries had been devastated both economically and politically by the war. During this time the USA thrived economically and politically. Meanwhile, as the USA wallowed in its strong postwar prosperity, power, and prestige, the other industrial economies were rebuilding and strengthening themselves. Thus, from the 1970s on, the Europeans and Japanese created ever stronger economies stronger economies, and the USA began to take its first steps toward becoming a nation with an economy ratcheting down.

In those years the USA transformed itself from being history’s strongest exporter and lender to breaking records for importing and borrowing. Meanwhile, another transformation was under way, having to with the once heavily ex-exploited Asian and Latin American societies. China, India, and Brazil were now well on their way toward breaking records for exporting and lending to the USA. (Du Boff)

It’s an U.S. tradition that “turnabout’s fair play.” So there’s a certain bit of humor here. More properly speaking, there *was* a certain bit of humor. No more. These days the USA owes \$6 *trillion* to other countries — yes, we owe

our creditors an eye-popping \$6,000,000,000,000 — with more than a third of it to go to China and India. Lenders to the USA, big and small, are critically dependent upon continuing their exports, but sooner or later they will realize that the massive debts the USA has run up will never be paid back. Then what? What happens next is as follows:

1. Bankruptcy at both ends
2. Desperation for both the sellers and their suppliers
3. Loss of jobs in many dimensions

That's not the end. Other things — awful things — are likely to occur; there has never been anything like this before. But it is difficult to see how either the borrowers or the lenders (or their suppliers, et al.) can come out of this looming collapse in any way but disaster.

There are many striking elements to this looming disaster, but at this point that which strikes me most is that — and I read the business news every day — there is little or not recognition that there is a crash on its way. If you were to go back and read the business news in 1928–1934, you would find the same vacuum. Nonetheless, in your daily reading, as noted earlier, you would be informed that – once again — “prosperity is just around the corner.” Nor it is unimportant to add that in those years, as now, leading economists were providing wrong-headed analyses confirming their optimism.

So much for the world of Big Business. Now we turn for a quick and disgusting look at what they have done to where most of the world's people live.

b. The Exploited Exploitation is not a recent invention; it has been a constant feature in history, even if not constant in amount and intensity. Now, in the capitalist epoch, there is a new wrinkle: Exploitation has been systematized — in both the rich and the poor societies. And to the degree that people of the “advanced” societies live well, they do so significantly by virtue of their nation’s imperialism and its associated militarism. And now, just as at the beginning of capitalism, the well-being of both the rich and the merely well off is based upon the low wages they pay to those who have fled their own robbed societies. (Frank)

“Yes, but” those in the rich societies will say, “that has changed in recent years; the once colonized societies are now independent.” Indeed, they are formally independent, but almost all the people of what had been colonies are -- with the endorsement of their bought-and-paid-for leaders — as much exploited as ever. Sometimes more. Thus it is that the once colonized or imperialized societies now have even larger populations of cruelly exploited men, women, and children.

4. Inequality

Lack of equality is both the cause and consequence of what is deeply harmful — economically, politically, militarily, and socially. Inherent to capitalism, inequality has been worsened by the domination of a few hundred U.S. and other corporations. History has always been marked by inequalities; today that domination has increased quantitatively and qualitatively. The USA is in the lead of that race, and it will be the focus of most of what follows. (Dowd, 2009)

Inequalities are harmful to the entire society, but most obviously to the bottom two-thirds of the society who suffer from its direct impacts. Its impact is greatest — to the point of death — so for those in the bottom fifth. Those in the top one-tenth are mostly responsible and also benefit the most. They not only have welcomed the plight of the majority, but do what they can to intensify it when politically possible. That they have done since the 1970s, as inequalities have deepened and spread.

Today's recession began four years ago. Since then, we have regularly been assured that good times are "just around the corner." Indeed, good times have already returned for the top guys on Wall Street, the well-dressed mobsters who took us into trouble and then blithely had the government bail them out. So look where we are:

The U.S. has some of the highest levels of long-term unemployment it has *ever* recorded, and job growth looks to remain disappointingly slow. Those out of work are likely to remain so for quite a while. (Rampell, *NYT* 2010-12-02)

The plight of the unemployed continues to worsen — more than 6 million unemployed for more than a year. Unemployment is rising and it's undermining our future. The longer this goes on, the more workers will find it impossible ever to return to employment, the more young people will find their prospect destroyed. (Krugman, *NYT* 2011-05-05)

In the following quotation from Krugman there is a reference to 1936–37. As noted earlier, the economy began to improve in 1935–36 when, in order to be re-elected, FDR finally began to pay less attention to the needs less of

Wall Street and more to the living, breathing people. The change began with the creation of Social Security and continued with government projects meeting socio-economic needs *and* providing jobs. In doing so, FDR began the New Deal. However, as noted earlier, when Wall Street persuaded him to cease that government spending, he did so, and in 1937–38 the recession returned. Full employment was not achieved until World War II. Now, back to Krugman:

We have already repeated a version of the mistake of 1937, withdrawing fiscal support much too early and perpetuating high unemployment. Yet worse things can happen. On the fiscal side, Republicans are demanding immediate spending cuts. It's 'The Mistake of 2010.' (*NYT*, 2011-06-02)

Times change — and not necessarily for the better. These days Wall Street is both more powerful and politically more sophisticated than it was in the 1930s. Pres. Obama's chosen economic advisors are all known to be Wall Street heavies: Robert Rubin, Lawrence Summers, and Timothy Geithner. (When Summers left the White House he whizzed right back to Wall Street).

The foregoing has been looking mostly at the rich. But it must be understood that in our capitalist world what has gone badly for those middle and the bottom has gone so because of what those at the top have done (and what they have not allowed to be done). What gets them rich and keeps them that way is the other side of the coin.

The decades from the 1970s to the present have increasingly been dominated by the wishes and achieved policies of the rich at the expense of

those at the middle and — most harmfully — the poor. In those years inequality has worsened. It has not only done a number on the poor, but has also pushed toward impoverishment for those in the middle.

There has been a sharp decline in the share of total income going to the lower- and middle-income American. The bottom 80 percent of households now receive less than half of total income. So who is getting the gains? The Budget Office reports that the upward redistribution away from the bottom 80 percent has gone to the highest-income 1 percent of Americans and that almost two-thirds of that rise actually went to the top 0.1 percent: the richest *one-thousandth* of all Americans. Who are the 0.1 percent? They are corporate executives, around 60 percent of whom make their money in finance — that is, from Wall Street. (Adapted from Paul Krugman, “Oligarchy, American Style” [NYT 2011-11-06])

The foregoing institutionalized cruelty has been accompanied by the stifling of all the policies badly needed for a healthy society — in matters of education, health care, decent housing, and full employment. Now we turn to the economy and its social crimes.

5. Taxes

Most of us grunt at the very word, but we know that to have a safe and decent society the government has much to do and it has to be paid for. OK. Also OK for most of us is that who pays how much or how little should be in accord with middle and high incomes and the needs of the poor. But what’s OK with us is *not* OK with the rich powers running the government. They see to it that they will pay low (or no) taxes, and increasingly since the 1970s Congress has said “Yessir, boss!”

In 1950 the top income brackets had a *91 percent* rate; today it is *35 percent*. Also, for investment income the rate is less than half of that: *15 percent* for investment income (dividends, capital gains, “carried interest,” hedge fund managers’ funds, and private equity investors). A 50 percent rate for incomes over \$1 million would raise \$48 billion in the next 10 years; eliminating the carried interest provision alone would raise 21 billion. (*NYT* 2011-08-17)

For a decade or so after World War II there was a string of decent reforms requiring that both rich individuals and companies pay taxes in keeping with their good lives, that those in the middle be taxed less, and no taxes at the bottom.

In 1932 there were over 600,000 corporations in the USA. Only 0.1 percent of them had assets over \$100 million, but they held 52 percent of all assets (and 7 percent owned 90 percent: that is, 59 percent held only 1.9 percent). In 1995 however, *Fortune* noted that 500 companies had revenues equal to 63 percent of U.S. GNP (far exceeding those of Japan and Germany; and their profits (*after* taxes) “rose a stunning 54 percent on a sales gain of only 8.2 percent and a jobs gain of only 2.6 percent.”

In the 1950s income taxes of both business and the public were raised substantially over what had been common before World War II. Then, as the 1970s began, Congress and state governments had been taken over by business and the rich. That meant two overlapping changes from the reformist years of the 1950s–1960s:

1. Social expenditures meeting the needs and possibilities of the nation, the middle class, and the poor were cut or ended.

2. The desires and fortunes of the rich and powerful were granted no matter what.

Here is what the billionaire investor Warren Buffett had to say in his article about those realities in his article “Stop coddling the rich,” (*NYT* 2011-08-15):

While the poor and middle class fight for us we mega-rich continue to get our extraordinary tax breaks. Some of us are investment managers who earn billions from our daily labors, but are allowed to classify our incomes as “carried interest,” thereby getting a bargain 15% tax rate: others own stock index futures for 10 minutes and have 60% of their gains taxed at 15% as if they had been long-term investors. My friends and I have been coddled long enough by a billionaire friendly Congress. It is time for our government to get serious about shared sacrifice.

Increasingly since the 1970s “our government” has bowed to Big Business and the rich with always lowered taxes as, in the same years it has wiped out badly-needed social programs for both our well-being and safety of all and the vital needs of the poor. Now we turn to consideration of some of what should also be seen as social crimes. (Kapp; Zinn)

Social Needs

As we begin it is necessary to clarify the words “social” and “needs.” Which society, of what kind, where and when? Whose needs? All ages, both sexes, all whatever place of birth or what? Here we will be concerned mostly with

the people of today's U.S. capitalist society, but much of what follows applies to other advanced capitalist nations and, to some degree, to those become *ex*-colonies after World War II. (Klein)

All too many social needs are unmet properly but here we will discuss only those of education and health, and housing, but with the understanding that all too much of what is defective there is to be found in, for example, housing, safety — you name it. That said, I will begin with a separate and brief discussion of those all of whose needs are disastrously unmet: the aged and the poor.

A society as rich as ours cannot be seen as decent or even sane when its aged and poor are inadequately fed, housed, and without adequate medical care. The millions in the USA who are in that condition are mocked and mistreated to the point of danger — especially if they are not “white” or male. After World War II the unfortunate many began to be treated somewhat less indecently in Western Europe and (if somewhat less so) in the USA. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a strong reversal. The earlier improvements were made in years when a substantial percentage of the public was involved politically. Times have changed; more attention has been given to borrowing, spending, sports, and TV. Meanwhile, the health care system was creating research groups to advise the powerful what to do to push society backward. They have succeeded.

Health Care

Our health care system is a disgrace, and a very dangerous one to many millions of us. When the Republicans gained control of the House in 2010, their leader Boehner announced what has been the enduring fallacy in the

USA: “We have the best health care system in the world!” Well, we may have the best-financed hospitals and research centers with “state of the art technologies,” but they are not accessible to most of us, including the majority whose health insurance is carefully designed to produce big profits more than good health.

You and I have been angry and worried for years about this dangerous disgrace. Here are a few notes to add to your anger:

- The nine companies of Big Pharma commonly give their CEO’s salaries of \$19 million a year (not counting stock options and other such benefits).
- The industry’s profit margins (according to *Fortune*) are nearly 4 times those of the other 500 biggest companies.
- In 1002 they spent more than \$2.5 billion on advertising and corruption. (*Multinational Monitor*, September 2001)
- Pfizer (of “the nine”) says it paid about \$20 million to 4,500 doctors...in the last six months and another \$15.3 million to 250 academic medical centers for trials...(*International Herald Tribune*, 2010-04-02)
- “Top Five Health insurers posted 56% profit *gains* in 2009.” (<http://bit.ly/bFglkr>)

The defects of our health care system combines disgrace with shortened lives for at least half of the people of our country for the indefinite future.

Education

Before and well into the 20th century, education for the overwhelming majority of our people was meager indeed. Unless you were from a well-to-do family, your education stopped at high school or, as in the case of my mother and most others, your at the 8th grade. Not until the late 1920s would anything like a majority of young people be able (let alone required) to go to high school. However, after World War II, the G.I. Bill made it possible for 16 *million* war veterans to be financially assisted for whatever education they sought. (I was one of them.) Nor was it a coincidental that it was in the decades after the war that the U.S. economy took the lead in the realms of engineering and science. As will be seen later, since the 1990s that lead has gone into reverse. (Kapp)

You may noticed from this article (or in your life) that since the 1970s the USA has been moving backward. The retrograde motion is especially apparent in education — whether in the Ivy League, main street colleges and universities, or (all too many) grade schools and high schools. Once abundant teaching jobs have been scarce; schools have more exams and less feeding of the curiosities and possibilities of young people. And teaching to test isn't teaching at all: It's indoctrination.

Whatever the defects of the postwar past up to the 1970s, they were minuscule compared with the current ominous trends. Is it only a coincidence that recently U.S. states (such as the customary bellwether, California) have been spending more on prisons than on schools?

In the past 50 years the U.S. prison population has risen greatly. Not only do we incarcerate at some six times the rate of Britain and seven times that

of Canada, but African-American men are seven times more likely to be locked up than whites. Is it by chance that The high percentage of African-Americans imprisoned increased most from 1965 to 2000? (Alexander)

Would our prisons be increasingly crowded if our society were becoming dominated more by decency than by greed and that to which we now turn? But remember, prisons — the main beneficiary of the phony “war on drugs” — do rid the ruling class of excess population. This concept and its thoughtgoing application in the USA are appallingly Nazi-like.

Wars

If there were a contest on which nation had conducted the most wars, it would be difficult indeed to know to decide the winner. However in the modern world — from 1798 (when we became a nation) to the present — it would be the USA, especially if we include the undeclared wars from 1798 to World War II.

The USA waged officially unofficial wars from the Caribbean to North Africa to the Mediterranean, and in Central and South America, China, Korea and the USSR (1918–1919, soon after its [successful] revolution). (Williams; La Feber)

If we go on from 1945 (*excluding* declared wars) the list would encompass about two dozen more, including (among others) Angola, Cambodia, Chile, the Congo, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Laos, Panama and Vietnam. Ah! We did declare war against Vietnam. Finally — a mere 20 years *after* our military fight against them began. (Young)

Those were the “good ole days” of U.S. wars, but what we have been doing in the 21st century in Iraq and Afghanistan take the booby — and very bloody — prize. Neither war should have begun for the USA, both did and will continue who knows how much longer. The White House says we are already on our way out of Iraq and are doing our best to end the war in Afghanistan. *How* and *why* we got into both of those wars is as disgusting as it is relevant. (Blum)

Iraq

The *why* is simple: oil. The *how* is at least as disgusting. It was justified by a mass of lies, but the ones who led the parade — Bush and his lapdog, the UK’s Blair — claimed that Iraq possessed threatening “weapons of mass destruction.” It turned out that both leaders knew that was a fabrication, a bald-faced lie, as a result of which many thousands on both sides were killed or wounded, and millions had their lives wrecked. (Blix)

As we do get out of Iraq, it will be to send more troops to Afghanistan. It is already worse than Iraq, and if Israel has its way, it will be followed by a war with Iran.

Afghanistan

The USA is fighting an undeclared war that cannot be won should take a lesson from the Russians. And leave. Here’s how our initial self-deception and associated self-destruction got us into this pickle. (See Johnson.)

The first major step was long ago, in 1979, when President Carter’s Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski persuaded him to sign the first of several

documents enabling the CIA to provide weaponry to an unknown small group calling itself “the Taliban.” How do we know? Because “Zbig” (as he likes to be called) told us in a boastful interview with the French *Nouvel Observateur* (1998-01-15). I quote: “Our stated intention in arming the Taliban in July 1979 was to draw the Russians into the Afghan trap.”

Three months later, Zbig wrote to Carter: “Now we have given the USSR its Vietnam war.” The Russians fought there for 8 years, and left in defeat. Then the Taliban weakened for a while. They rose to their present strength by inducing Afghan farmers to grow opium. The now-rich Taliban now control 90 percent of the world crop, and also dominate most of Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. Having once assisted them, the USA is now fighting the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. (But then CIA friends come and go; ask Saddam Hussein, Manuel Noriega, Ferdinand Marcos, The Shah of Iran...)

Congratulations Uncle Sam. In April of 2010, Obama expressed his intention to stay in Afghanistan and win. A continuing Afghan war can all too easily set off more sparks. It is a region too close to five nervous countries — none of them “two-bit dictatorships” and all with nuclear weapons. They are Pakistan, India, China, the Soviet Union.

Israel-Palestine and Iran

Beginning in the late 1940s the USA provided financial, military, and (in the UN) political support to Israel. When we began that, armed force against the UK was needed if the Israelis were to settle in the region. The slaughter of millions of Jews in the Holocaust was more than sufficient to convince numberless Jews to go to their historic place of origin in the

Middle East. It was, of course, also the place of origin for the Palestinians, who, if in different ways and degrees, had also been robbed and mistreated by outsiders (especially the British). (Oz; Rashid)

PERSONAL SIDEBAR

What follows will be critical of Israel as regards its relationship with the Palestinians and its militarism. Let me repeat that my mother was a Jew and, as noted earlier, I was brought up by her, not by my Irish Catholic father. I have long participated in struggles against all forms of racism and repression, be it against Jews, Palestinians, Blacks, Asians, or Irish Catholics.

Perhaps it was possible from 1948 on that the Palestinians and the Israelis could learn to live together, but both — understandably — wanted Palestine for themselves. Of course, the Palestinians actually lived there. The Zionists wanted the turf for themselves, finding the presence of the local Palestinians as pesky as the presence of Native Americans in the Americas had been for Europeans. On both sides there have been and remain those who seek to find a mutually acceptable agreement. But, increasingly since 1949, both sides have also used what is called terrorism. But these days, it's almost all Israel. The occupiers have succeeded in making the Palestinians the most oppressed people on earth.

In the foregoing discussion I have sought to see something of both sides. The USA has not. It has systematically taken Israel's side even as Israel's Netanyahu seems to seek justification for a war against both the Palestinians and Iran. The latter is "justified" because Iran is possibly (and certainly understandably) seeking to have atomic weapons. Even though Iran keeps having its atomic scientists murdered by foreign agents, there's still a chance. But it's only a chance. What is certain, however, is not only that Israel has nukes — hundreds of them — and seems eager to use them against Iran. (Under the circumstances, any desire by Iran to have its own nukes starts to make a lot of sense).

Given this boiling madness, what very possibly lies ahead is an Israeli-prompted war against Iran. I assume Israel could not win a prolonged land war there, not without the USA — but not to worry. Reflect on the substantial political support of Israel in the U.S. Congress and the White House. And maybe in the USA.

In sum, we — not only Israel and Iran, but the world — are on the edge of a cliff over which the next war to end all wars will succeed. It will end all wars — but only because it will end life on earth. Nor is it amusing to add that if we don't do ourselves in with war, we will do it more slowly by our mistreatment of Mother Nature.

The Environment and Waste

It is clear that unless we soon make substantial changes in how and what we produce and consume the world will sink into irreversible and increasing dangers to air and water and much else upon which our very existence relies. There has always been destruction and waste, of course, but in the past

century their qualitative and quantitative explosion are on or over the edge of becoming lethal. Modern ways of what, how, and the ways in which we produce and consume have increasingly poisoned what we depend upon for life. (Foster, 2009)

Who are the producers? Those in agriculture and industry who depend upon such doings for profits. And the rest of us are consumers. The producers need us customers to go along with them, pushed by the imagined needs or desires by advertising. But we the customers must awaken ourselves from such entrancement, now — for time is running out. Life was difficult for most before the age of consumerism; because of our increasingly frail environment, we have succeeded in making it dangerously so. Permit me to go on with some substantial and relevant quotations that make that point:

It is no secret that today we are facing a planetary environmental emergency, endangering most species of the planet, including our own, and that this impending catastrophe has its roots in the capitalist economic system. (Foster)

That was written in 2011. But he acknowledges that his reasoning was anticipated in 1923 by Veblen, as follows:

‘The American plan’ of resource exploitation was one of accumulation by encroachment on both the environment and the indigenous population with a settled practice of converting all public wealth to private gain on a plan of legalized seizure: to turn every public need to account as a means of private gain

and to capitalize it as such. In that process, staple resources were overexploited by speeding up the output and underbidding on the price, leading to a rapid exhaustion, with waste of the natural supply.

That set of processes set the stage for Veblen's "absentee ownership" (now called "monopoly capitalism"), with ever more collusive methods of turning public wealth to private gain by means of the careful regulation of scarcity and monopolistic pricing, especially evident in the timber, coal, and oil industries. Even earlier (1899) Veblen had written: "The infiltration of salesmanship into production was the proliferation of economic waste; the expenditure that does not serve human life or human well-being."

To which, Foster adds:

In the 19th century workers' consumption goods were not subjected to the giant sales efforts which arose with monopoly capitalism. What waste was commonplace did not have the same "functional" role for accumulation that it was later to acquire, where the chief problem was not the efficiency of production on the supply side but the generation of markets on the demand side. Analysis of these thus had to await their appearance in the 20th century, first by Veblen, and then -- in a synthesis of Marx and Veblen — in Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*. For them the principal problem was the absorption of the enormous economic surplus resulting from the constantly expanding productivity of the system. It could be absorbed in three ways: capitalist consumption, investment, or waste.

Economic waste takes various forms in both military spending and the sales effort, the latter including advertising, product variations, planned obsolescence, and model changes. In 2005, the USA spend over a *trillion* dollars on marketing (which is a whopping 9 percent of GNP). This is, of course, not a productive activity at all. In fact, it is utter waste.

To say that capitalism has been simultaneously the most efficient and the most wasteful productive system in history is to point to the contrast between the great efficiency with which a particular factory produces and packages a product such as toothpaste, and the contrived and massive inefficiency of an economic system which is owed to the marketing, not the production of the dentifrice. (Dowd, 1989)

If the USA and other advanced industrial nations were alone in the world, it would be disgusting enough to see an already perilously functioning environment lurch into always deeper and broader realms of waste and inefficiency. But we are not alone. We live in a world now holding more than 7 billion people, three quarters of whom are without a safe, let alone decent, life. Most of humanity is deprived of enough to eat in terms either of quantity or quality. Put differently, what has become the normal functioning of the capitalist world is very profitable indeed for a few thousand corporations, but it is murderous for at least several billion others. (Krugman, 2003)

Conclusion

Whether in the USA or the other rich powers, “we the people” [the nonrich, nonruling, masses] have allowed ourselves to be hypnotized or paralyzed by

those seeking — and getting — profits and power. However, in recent months we have begun to look the Devil in the eye, and the furor of Occupy Wall Street is making the USA into a nation of Wall Streets.

Noam Chomsky was invited to speak to the Boston installment of OWS in Boston in late 2011. He was impressed:

I have never seen anything like this Occupy movement in scale and character. Here and worldwide people are trying to create communities that just might be the basis for the kinds of lasting organizations necessary to overcome the barriers ahead and the blacklist that's already coming... You can't expect significant changes without a large, active, popular base. It is necessary to get out into the country and help people understand what the Occupy movement is about, what they themselves can do, and the consequences of doing nothing.

I add this. The Occupy uprisings are just what the doctor ordered. Importantly, since the protests began, a growing number of people across the land are also rising up and beginning to act upon broader and deeper issues. What prompted the city protests was what Big Business has done to get rid of socially decent policies; how they have run loose to make fortunes; how they are succeeding in taking government back to the 1920s — but without its jazz.

The decent and modest reforms created in the 1930s and added to after World War II have been wiped out. There is an important lesson there for us. Three cheers for bringing about reforms, but they can only be brought

into being and sustained by substantial political work by a good number of us, or they will be undone by the few from whom power was reduced.

Democracy must be fought for vigorously to be born, to function, and to continue. It is not enough to vote and nothing else between elections but “shop till you drop” as we in the USA did, as the 1960s slid toward the 1970s.

Big Business has worked, connived, plotted, and ultimately succeeded — from Carter to Obama — in seeing that the New Deal won’t happen again. And it’s our fault. Look at what we let them get away with:

1. Big business has become gigantic, and dominated by big Wall Street.
2. U.S. business is increasingly oriented abroad – for selling, buying, production, and borrowing.
3. U.S. jobs and participation in union activities has declined.
4. It has become always easier for corporations to corrupt and control, in local, state, and — most harmfully — national politics.
5. Most — nearly all — elected politicians have been bought off.

As unemployment, increased hours, lower wages and benefits have worsened and it has become increasingly clearer to both workers and *hoi polloi* (“the people”) that what is around the corner is not only a depression, but the disappearance of anything resembling democracy. It is overdue for us — that is, for the people — to get involved politically and stay that way.

What has become awful in the USA in recent decades will soon change direction to what threatens to be disastrous. It is up to always more of us to become always more active politically; regarding what?

Just about everything we do and *don't* do at home with respect to the economy and jobs, health, education, housing, and the poor and ill. Abroad? Earlier I have listed the innumerable open and disguised military actions of the USA. I challenge our Congresses and presidents to show that our militarism has beneficial to anyone other than the “military-industrial complex.” Jobs? With a truly democratic society we could have had full employment with those working would be doing something socially needed and useful: and not murderous.

It is vital that we become politicized for what we know and care about; that we make effort to reverse our recent past and ongoing directions at home and abroad. As noted earlier, important as it is that all of us work hard politically in our cities and towns, that has been and will directly or indirectly be watered down or reversed by our state and national legislators; we must create and/or join political organizations working not only in, but beyond our home towns. (See Rasmus; Reich.)

What follows is a partial list of problems needing strong political efforts by a substantial percentage of us. As noted earlier, the areas of need are most dangerous for the old and the poor, but social policies have become entirely inadequate for a majority of us; we must work together politically to make the society “ours” and reverse ongoing tendencies:

1. Education, health, and decent housing must become available for all and paid for by the government.

2. Public services should be paid for by a tax system sensibly and decently based upon income levels: high taxes for high incomes, less for middle incomes, none for the poor.

4. Steps to cleanse the air should be substantial, and include what is necessary in terms of what is produced and used, by whom, and for what purpose.

5. U.S. wars must move toward zero. The issues marking political campaigns should include candidates' position on ongoing and potential wars.

6. It would be worthwhile to look back at the programs of The New Deal" of the 1930s and the even stronger policies of the late 1940s and the 1950s, all of which since the 1970s have been cancelled or become meaningless. Among other revivals it is important to place limits on how gigantic corporations can become and which practices should be made illegal.

7. Not least in importance is to develop legislation which makes it impossible for Congress (or presidents) to take the USA into war without public discussion and debate. The "military-industrial complex" (and many of their employees and supporters) are against any interference in such matters, and let the Constitution be damned; which, since World War II, it has been.

Since the 1970s the young and not so young of the USA have been "taught" that "private enterprise" left to itself is what is best for all: that government should function foremost for business, have strong militaries and police. We must unlearn that dangerous notion and, in doing so, work hard and often

to make the USA no the richest but among the most decent and democratic societies.

The time to start is now if we are to catch up and put the rich and powerful where they belong: disappearing into ancient history.

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