

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS COUNTRY?

Here are the far-reaching themes I have seen recently that will most likely affect the U.S. economic scene for the next 50 years. Let's begin by stating the problems and go on to seemingly logical but inappropriate solutions, and then finish with an outline of alternative solutions.

The institutions set up to propagate the general welfare and well being of our nation as a whole do not function well. It is difficult, if not impossible, to envision just how our country can provide for the delivery of adequate health, education and justice. We are unable to protect the environment, preserve small-scale agriculture, enable local manufacturing, or do a host of things that traditionally bind a society together.

For instance, our public media channels: TV, radio and newspapers, fail to communicate because they deem only sensational occurrences as newsworthy. Furthermore, superficial presentations of opposing points of view have taken precedence over discussions of substantive issues. The complex background history necessary to understanding most public policy matters is beyond what commercial media can present, because the cost of in-depth coverage exceeds any revenue available in the public realm.

Our political process is narrow and self-serving because decisions are placed in the context of preserving the continuation of current alliances and allegiances. The political process serves to hide the truth so as to avoid making hard choices. If we examine military commitments required to allow our nation's continued dependence on foreign energy sources, or if we examine the patriotic groundswell for the rebuilding of hurricane-ravaged New Orleans, we find that no one person or party is willing to question the status quo. Our natural propensity to avoid hard decisions carries us into a deeper quagmire.

Just as most politicians' first priority is to get re-elected, the first aspiration of most employees is to keep their jobs. This is not to say that employees do not want to do their jobs well. However, it is apparent that when a choice is made between doing what is right for others and what is right for oneself, most of us err on the side of self-preservation. We accept this as normal behavior, as human nature. The problem is that our common interest has succumbed to the power of self-interest. Our society therefore languishes, and concern for the public good has deteriorated to the point where economic opportunity is reserved for those who are ultra-competitive, technologically adept, or good-looking.

Perhaps our great experiment with Democracy is over. The power of narrow, single-interest lobbyists far overshadows the interests of the general public. Social segmentation of our population based on race, religion and economic class no longer allows for a potential leader to rise up based purely on individual merit and constituent

endorsement. It costs too much to get elected for almost any office without a party machine or independent wealth.

We have put ourselves, along with the next several generations, into a fiscal straight jacket. Our dysfunctional political system makes the most palatable choice for the short term, a choice that generally turns out to be the most costly in the long term. This strategy has manifested itself in a lower standard of living for working Americans and is evident through higher prices for any “quality “goods or services. Cheap imported food, household goods, and entertainment are available because they are brought to us by mass markets through global trade fueled by non-renewable resources. In another generation, this sugar-coated retail bonanza will be over.

Another cost of our structural leadership vacuum is that Americans who work for a living or those retired on fixed incomes will not be able to afford to retire, nor will they have rights to previously contracted benefits.

Many of the problems our country faces can be framed in terms of money; one reason I enjoy discussing these issues. If you follow the money, you find where the power lies. Since moneyed interests are so effective in framing the discussions regarding public policy, they only allow for options that can be controlled by large scaled organizations, be they government, business or media interests. It is easy to feel overwhelmed, discouraged, and even hopeless. It appears, then, the only logical course is to let big business or government bail us out through some new technology or law. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let’s look at energy. The largest companies in the world have our nation’s armed forces at their service. They provide fuel for our homes, businesses and recreational needs, and to ensure a constant flow, we need to do what we are told. The future does not look bright for decreasing our dependence on foreign sources unless we move to nuclear or large-scale hydrogen power, both venues that require these same companies.

Wind energy is still too complex and expensive to be used by individual households. Conservation of energy gets lip service while public transportation, a means for saving energy, is losing funding as privatization continues.

There is no national debate with which to consider any alternatives, including the use of bicycles and passive-solar construction. Making the construction of bike lanes and the necessary traffic signaling mandatory in all urban and suburban areas, along with incentives for people to live near their work place would fundamentally alter our need for energy. The inclusion of solar-energy design features in all new construction and remodeling projects might offer huge conservation benefits as well.

Investment opportunities would abound in the energy field if companies that look beyond petroleum had a chance to participate in a national move towards conservation. What are the chances of this occurring? More on these topics in subsequent articles.

