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# Can Anything Be Done?

—Evaluating the Liberal Prescriptions for America's Malaise—

Scott North

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## Can Anything Be Done?

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### 1. Introduction

The late Richard Rorty's (1998) book, *Achieving Our Country*, takes its title from the much quoted last passage of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1988), a story about racial injustice that ends with a call for "relatively conscious" blacks and whites to "end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world." (Quoted in Rorty, 1998, 13)

Thinking about America's place in history, Rorty surveys the 20<sup>th</sup> century American Left. He describes how the America led by a politically active Left that secured gains for workers and minorities in the first two-thirds of the century was transformed through Marxist theory and the tragedy of Vietnam into a sinner nation. The stage was thus set for the waves of religious redemption that have washed over the country since the Reagan presidency. Against this recent history, Rorty's goal is the revitalization of a pragmatic, politically involved Left. His models are John Dewey and Walt Whitman, who together represented what Rorty calls "the reformist left" that struggled to achieve a socially just nation through constitutional democracy.

As much as I would like to use the following pages to recount progress toward social justice, current circumstances demand a different kind of paper. Since Rorty's book came out, the calculated barbarities of Iraq and economic polarization have assailed America. The situation is more serious than it looks. Before the country can again think of achieving itself, it must heal. None of the proposed treatments can guarantee recovery, however the shift in the stated preferences of the American electorate since 2004 makes clear that voters in the 2008 US elections are likely to support Democratic, progressive, or liberal candidates rather than their Republican, conservative, or neo-conservative opponents (CBS News, 2007). Anticipating a Democratic Party victory in 2008, my purpose in this paper is to present the perspectives of opinion leaders on the American Left and consider their utility for the next administration as it tries to bind up the wounds inflicted by eight years of Bush/Cheney and their friends.

To evaluate the efficacy of the liberal prescriptions we must first observe America's

symptoms and diagnose underlying causes. In the following pages, I examine America's position in the world community, the post-industrial economic transformation and its impact on the lives of American workers and their families, the health care crisis, and problems related to human capital development. I then discuss the proposals for healing through the development of sustainable, environmentally friendly lifestyles. I conclude by assessing whether America's leadership has the political will to revive the Reformist Left prescribed by Rorty.

## 2. America's Burdens: Empire and the Iraq Invasion

In his expose of the Bush White House's faith-based approach to governing, Ron Suskind (2004) quotes an anonymous White House official (known now to be "Bush's Brain," former chief presidential advisor, Karl Rove) as saying that a view of reality based on enlightenment principles and empiricism is "not the way that the world works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality." "We're history's actors," he said, "and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

One might question whether any empire so conceived can long endure. Harvard historian Niall Ferguson argues that America's position atop the global hierarchy is already threatened. Following Gibbon, Ferguson (2006) sees signs of impending collapse: military decline (Iraq War); the decline of republican government (rise of the imperial presidency); economic decline (foreign debt and trade imbalances); and cultural decline (the waning of American soft power).

Ferguson is not alone in thinking that America is not such a good country these days. Two recent polls show that the ability of the US to influence global mores through the attractiveness of its cultural products is fading (Brown, 2006). The US is seen as trigger-happy and aggressive. President Bush and his administration are viewed as hypocritical: claiming to act on behalf of freedom and democracy, while employing torture and supporting totalitarian states. American culture is increasingly seen as part of the problem and so its public diplomacy is in tatters, leaving the country increasingly isolated.

A Pew Foundation global opinion poll (New York Times, 2007) finds majorities in the 47 countries polled expressing "profound disappointment in America's failure to live up to its own ideals and standards." Most, including residents of US allies Britain, Poland, Turkey, and Kuwait, do not think that the spread of American customs around the world is a good thing. Yet two-thirds of Americans do. Many Americans and their leaders seem deaf to what others think about the war, even as it ruins America's reputation and cripples its ability to project influence.

Whatever impressionistic understandings people may have, the facts about the American Empire seem to be even worse. America is the global leader in many dubious categories: oil consumption, carbon-dioxide emissions, external debt, military spending, and weapons sales. America is also first in military training (involved in training soldiers in 138 foreign lands how to use the weapons it sells them) and first in private military personnel (126,000 in Iraq alone). Frieda Berrigan (2007), an arms trade expert, whose article is the source of these figures, says that the destruction caused by the US in these areas is cloaked by economic terms. For example, fighter planes are just a type of export product. Instead, she says, we need to think of arms sales as drugs, with the US stimulating addiction and making money by feeding it.

Expensive to protect and maintain, empire is a burden. Less obvious are empire's costs to republican political institutions and corresponding damage to what might be termed the soul of the nation.

No one has set forth these costs of America's empire as clearly as Chalmers Johnson. His recent trilogy of books describe an America that is unstable because it is trying to be both a "domestic democracy and a foreign imperialist." (Johnson, 2007). This combination is only possible because the public is ignorant of what happens overseas. Few know that America maintains more than 700 military bases that are the foundation for its empire in the same way that colonies were the foundation for earlier British and Roman ones.

Nor do Americans realize that their society is becoming stealthily militarized. The budget for maintaining the empire of bases has become the core item of the national budget (Johnson, 2006). Growing like a tumor, the US military budget now accounts for about half of global military spending. It is also the invisible basis for a large slice of the domestic economy. This has led to legislative corruption. Congress is less sensitive to citizens' needs than to the demands of corporations in the defense sector. Moreover, much of the military budget is secret or buried in appropriations and programs for other departments, such as Energy, NASA, Homeland Security, and the CIA. In sum, no one really knows how much maintaining the empire costs.

Robert Dreyfuss, national security correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine, estimates that defense spending has "nearly doubled since the mid-1990s" even leaving out the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. For 2008, President Bush is asking for \$650 billion for defense, up from around \$400 billion in 2001. Added to the estimates for spying and intelligence agencies, the total 2008 military budget may be \$1 trillion, even though the enemies are "small bands of al-Qaeda fanatics." (Dreyfuss, 2007)

The Bush administration sold the war in Iraq to the public as a cheap and easy fight. But early estimates of the cost (\$50-60 billion) were quickly dwarfed by reality. Economist

and Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, and his colleague, Linda Blimes, used the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office's assumptions about Iraq and America's continuing presence there and calculated \$1.27 trillion as the total cost of the war (Yglesias, 2006). Stiglitz and Blimes later updated their estimate to more than \$2 trillion (Kristof, 2006). "A trillion is what you get when you spend a million dollars a day...for a million days," says Matthew Yglesias in the *American Prospect*, trying to put the scale of the war in context. The war is costing \$246 million dollars a day, more than \$10 million an hour, \$1.75 billion a week. (McGovern and Polk, 2006).

One reason costs are high is that much of the war has been privatized. "Security contractors," says Paul Krugman (2006e), are symbolic of "the great march backward" in government. Ignoring the accumulated wisdom about how to make government work, the Bush administration, is running America "as if it were a 16<sup>th</sup>-century monarchy." Such arrangements are a way to "evade accountability" and provide sources of patronage.

But the cost of this backward march may be the permanent degradation of the American soul. The conflict in Iraq is framed as a war. In fact, it is an occupation. "An occupying army can't win anything," points out George Lakoff (2006), professor of Rhetoric at UC Berkeley. Fighting war requires courage. Withdrawal is seen as cowardly. But an occupying army is an easy target and the American occupation of Iraq legitimizes the actions of radical Islamist groups who claim to be fighting to expel the invaders.

It doesn't help that some Americans fighting in Iraq represent some of America's worst aspects. Stan Goff, a career army special operations officer, has documented the spread of white, male supremacy in the US armed forces. "We've got Aryan Nation graffiti in Baghdad," he quotes Department of Defense investigators as saying (Goff, 2006). As American society becomes more militarized, domination, based on sex, race, and religion, becomes the central concern. Domination contributes to the dehumanization of both the dominated and the dominators, who, ironically, become the most dominated subjects. The mercenaries and private contractors in Iraq, writes Goff, are "a culture obsessed with death, firearms, and racial-purity doctrines." For these men, armed conflict and the disparagement of the female and foreign are ways to actualize white, male, heterosexual identity. In these developments, Goff sees the rise of nascent American fascism.

For former president Jimmy Carter, Iraq symbolizes a moral crisis that endangers American values. The culprit for Carter is not military fascism, but a rigid, self-righteous fundamentalism that melds with poverty and ignorance to produce a "rate of firearms homicide in the United States that is nineteen times higher than that of 35 other high-income countries combined." Carter finds the US more pro-death than pro-life and questions whether a nation that makes frequent use of the death penalty, has declared its

right to make first use of nuclear weapons, engages in torture and “extraordinary rendition,” and ignores the Geneva Conventions can be considered civilized (Wills, 2006). That such a nation is not seen as spreading democracy and has low approval ratings is not surprising.

In sum, the burdens of empire are draining America’s moral and economic strength. The formidable soft power that supported post World War II American diplomacy has evaporated. The world tends to see America as a hypocritical nation that condones torture and denies human rights abroad and at home. Its invasion of Iraq was carried out under false pretenses and is now viewed as a cynical oil grab.

Empire, says Johnson, leads to imperial bankruptcy. As in past empires, this bankruptcy will be political and financial, caused by the expense of “huge standing armies, almost continuous wars, an ever-growing economic dependence on the military-industrial complex and the making of weaponry, and ruinous military expenses as well as a vast, bloated ‘defense’ budget.” (Johnson, 2007) The imperial road ends in increasing domestic tyranny and either military or civilian dictatorship (Johnson says the latter is more likely in America) that may preserve the empire but will mean the death of democracy.

The obvious solution for Johnson and others is to give up the empire as the British did. “The people of the British Isles chose democracy over imperialism,” he writes (*ibid.*). Will Americans also see that that a country that tries to be both democratic at home and imperialist abroad is hopelessly contradictory? Wise American men and women on the left debate the foolishness of declaring “war on terror,” the moral perversion of lumping all Arabs together as the “Islamofascist” enemy, the ways that America’s foreign policy breeds terrorism, and how the legal culture of the US itself is undermined by the war on terror because it is considered unpatriotic in “wartime” to criticize the government or use the courts to assert that even alleged terrorists have legal rights (Powell, 2006). But these are relatively abstract issues. Where ordinary Americans will feel the contradiction between democracy at home and imperialism abroad is in their wallets.

### 3. Finance and the Possibility of Imperial Collapse

America is increasingly dependent on foreigners to finance its deficits. Alan Greenspan called the situation “unsustainable” in 2005 (Corn, 2005) and it has worsened since. Tax cuts for the wealthy, pushed by President Bush, combined with a massive trade deficit and foreign ownership of vast quantities of American debt - the US must borrow almost \$3 billion per day to finance itself (Stiglitz, 2006) - are burdens that American cannot bear forever.

The macro situation can be summed up as follows: "What a great system. The Chinese lend us money to buy their goods. Then we have to pay back the loans with interest. They make money off us at both ends." (Corn, 2005). China's central bank holds more than a trillion dollars of US debt. Japan's central bank holds well over \$800 billion in reserves. Both enjoy large trade surpluses with the US. Investments in US currency and consumer markets by Japan and China are the reason why the dollar has not collapsed as standard economic theories predict (Johnson, 2006). But at some point the suppliers may find other markets and stop subsidizing America's appetite for consumer goods and addiction to cheap credit.

The effects of a US collapse would be global. But whatever the US does to address its problems will also have inevitably global ramifications. Stiglitz (2006) says that Americans should save more: the savings rate was negative in 2005 and 2006. The last time that happened was in 1932 and 1933, at the height of the Great Depression. The approaching retirement of 78 million baby boomers will mean further falls in domestic savings (Crutsinger, 2007). In addition, unless new technologies bring dramatic increases in productivity, America's potential rate of growth will fall with the supply of skilled labor. This could reduce tax revenues and investors' expectations, leading them to seek more profitable alternatives (Economist, 2006 Oct. 26).

America is now paying out more in interest to foreigners than its foreign investments bring into the US. More foreign borrowing will raise the interest payments America owes to foreigners, which are already the fastest growing part of federal government spending and which will only increase because of what the government has borrowed since 2001. (The New York Times, 2006, Oct. 5). As America on the whole grows poorer, polarization within the country is becoming more evident.

Unless Americans save more, America must either raise interest rates to attract more and more money from abroad, reduce spending, or increase taxes. Stiglitz (2006) thinks a tax increase targeted at the rich coupled with a tax break for low-income people would actually increase spending, simultaneously reducing the deficit and boosting the US economy.

The economy has officially been in expansion since 2001. Yet while corporate profits have gone up, the lives of most Americans have not improved. Higher oil prices and the collapse of the housing market, especially defaults in sub-prime mortgages, are squeezing the working classes (Krugman, 2007h).

Economic growth today produces increased employment insecurity as capitalists looking for investment opportunities turn to buying up companies, stripping them of "waste" (i.e. workers and liabilities, such as pension and health care obligations) and



reselling them at high profits. US companies looking for capital these days often find that only the "private equity guys" (sometimes called "strip and flip artists") are willing to take a chance. In cases where there is a union of skilled workers, labor may have some leverage and some of these deals ultimately work to the benefit of rank and file employees, but strong unions are rare in the US today and even when there are gains they "are small compared to the wreckage of lives and communities before the restructurings." (Russakoff and Cho, 2007).

Ultimately the lives of individual workers mean little to large corporations. If a company has to pay compensation for any of the estimated 56,000 American workers who die from work-related illness or injury each year, that is simply a cost of doing business. Corporations are reckoned to be the most expensive segment of American criminal activity: their crimes cost far more than all street crimes combined and are often violent, yet corporations generally escape prosecution and punishment (Mokhiber, 2007.).

So do friends of the president. Scooter Libby, Vice President Cheney's former assistant, has escaped jail time, but that is just the tip of the iceberg of denial about the current course that threatens America's ship of state (Krugman, 2007e). The denial seems to be concentrated among the "haves and the have-mores," the wealthy people George Bush once called, "my base," people who dwell far removed from daily economic realities that trouble less wealthy Americans.

These "haves and have-mores" became wealthy by moving money around in the financial markets. Financial transactions are not physical production, but they add to GDP. This increasing slice of GDP translates into political power. Hedge fund managers are hailed as the "new masters of the universe." (Cohen, 2007) Their wealth is so great that most Americans can't even conceive of the magnitude: a billion dollars invested at ten percent annual interest "earns" \$100 million a year, or \$274,000 a day. What's more, investment returns are taxed as capital gains (15 percent) rather than as income (a much higher rate). In this context, ordinary professionals are now referred to as "upper-losers." Education may keep you out of poverty, but unless you are really lucky, it will not get you into the select company of the 300,000 earners whose combined take in 2005 was nearly equal to the income of the bottom 150 million workers (Johnson, D., 2007). The presence of such a class of super-rich is a symptom of a top-heavy, increasingly unstable structure.

#### 4. Cancerous Inequality

The American myth is that social mobility is more likely in the US than anywhere else. The reality is that social mobility is lower in the US than the other industrialized nations.

OECD figures show that American children born in poverty are doomed to stay there. Between 2001 and 2004, only the top fifth of US households gained wealth, and the effects of the growing inequality were magnified for minorities (Jenkins, 2007). However, if we ignore race and class, taking instead the nation as the unit of analysis, we see a rosier picture. David Brooks (2006) notes that rumors of America's decline are not supported by statistics: the US spends more on research and development than all other G-7 nations combined; the US share of global GDP is actually slightly higher now than in 1971; US universities occupy 22 of the top 30 spots; the nation ranks second only to Finland in competitiveness.

However, when the focus is on class the picture becomes cloudy. Paul Krugman (2006h) says the message of the figures is ambiguity. Overall the median income of middle-income households rose 16 percent between 1973 and 2005. But the gains were only possible because increases in working women compensated for declines in men's wages. Time and labor-saving devices make life easier, while longer commutes, greater fluctuations in income, and worries about health care and education may make it harder, depending on who you are and where you live.

The point, as David Leonhardt (2006) notes, is that income is only one way to measure whether things are getting better or worse. The way the inflation-tracking Consumer Price Index (CPI) is calculated makes life seem worse than it really is. By overstating inflation, incomes, from which inflation is subtracted, seem smaller. Revising the figures shows that median incomes have risen, 27 percent for men and 65 percent for women, over the last thirty years.

Even if life may seem somewhat better from this longer-term perspective, the last few years have not been good at all. Most incomes have not gone up since 2001. For younger Americans (aged 18-44), income fell 8 to 9 percent between 2001 and 2004. Debt levels, especially for college, are rising, as are working hours for younger people as they try to generate more income to pay their debts. And health care costs are also rising (Trumbull, 2006). Family incomes averaged \$70,700 in 2004, down 2.3 percent from 2001. In terms of wealth, median family net worth was boosted somewhat by rising home prices. It rose 1.5 percent to \$93,100 from 2001 to 2004 (Crutsinger, 2006, Feb 23).

Taking on debt is one way to achieve a higher standard of living, but doing so traps people, especially young people, in "a web of debt spun by a 'credit industrial complex' that almost seems to function like a conspiracy to drive people into financial servitude." (Zachary, 2006). According to Danny Schechter, producer of the documentary, *In Debt We Trust*, the credit industrial complex benefits from the expansion of domestic debt and it does not care about the social consequences (ibid.).

Debt also contributes to GDP. 2004 GDP rose 4.2 percent. If GDP is the measure of prosperity, the US is indeed growing. Productivity is also rising. But salaries are not going up. There is a disconnect between GDP and the “joyless economy” experienced by the vast majority of Americans (Krugman, 2005). What is needed, suggests Robert Reich (2006), Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, is more attention to MDP: Median Domestic Prosperity. MDP takes the middle of the economy rather than the overall totals as the standard for growth. By this measure, the US has been in a recession for the last six years.

But at the top of the wealth and income pyramids there is joy aplenty. The best explanation for increased inequality in the US is not falling wages among the working classes but astounding rises in income and wealth among the rich. And their numbers are rising, too. In 1985 there were 13 people in America who had a billion dollars. Now there are more than 1000 (Harris 2007). The super-rich have their own country within the US. Robert Frank, economist at Cornell University, has dubbed it “Richistan.” To get in you need at least \$10 million.

But \$10 million is peanuts in the New Gilded Age that some say we are entering. The old Gilded Age was a time of gross inequality: John D. Rockefeller’s 1894 income was 7,000 times the average per capita income. Last year, 2006, the income of top-earner James Simons, a hedge fund manager, was \$1.7 billion: 38,000 times the average. Paul Krugman (2007b) who is not alone in noticing these developments, writes that the New Gilded Age seems less harsh because of safety nets like Social Security and Medicare. Nevertheless, tax policies under the last four presidents have consistently favored the interests of the wealthy over the less fortunate. One example of regressive changes in the tax code is the repeal of the estate tax.

“The best-off Americans are not only winning by an extraordinary margin right now. They are the only ones who are winning at all,” writes Teresa Tritch (2006). Drawing on the work of Piketty and Saez, America’s foremost experts on long-term inequality, Tritch and others report that tax rates for the top 0.01 percent of earners have fallen from 60 percent in 1980 to about 34 percent now (Krugman, 2006g).

Robert Gordon and Ian Dew-Becker at Northwestern University found that that the rich have absorbed so much of America’s gains that there is little left to trickle down. At the 99.99<sup>th</sup> percentile, wage and salary income rose 497 percent between 1972 and 2001 (2005 estimated income: over \$6 million). At the 99.9<sup>th</sup> percentile, it rose 181 percent (2005 estimated income: \$1.6 million). At the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile it rose 87 percent (2005 estimated income: \$402,000). At the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile it rose 34 percent – only about one percent per year (Francis, 2006; Krugman, 2006c). After taking office, President Bush

pushed through additional tax cuts for these highest earning Americans, while cutting programs for the poor and middle-class, such as food stamps and Medicaid (Tritch, 2006).

The widening gap is thus no accident. Jared Bernstein of the Economic Policy Institute explains:

Economics, once an elegant and sensible set of ideas and principles devoted to shaping outcomes for the betterment of society, has been reduced to a restrictive set of ideologically inspired rules devoted to an explanation of why we cannot take the necessary steps to meet the challenges we face. (Quoted in Tritch, 2006)

The rationale for enriching the rich offered by the right is Social Darwinism. Wealthy conservatives believe they deserve large gains because they are more moral than others. They oppose helping the less fortunate because aid damages their moral fiber (Reich, 2005b). Education is another rationale: those with more schooling deserve higher earnings. But the salaries of college graduates fell about 5 percent between 2000 and 2004 (Krugman, 2006c). Instead of benefits going to knowledge workers, we are seeing the emergence of a powerful, hereditary elite. This Republican engineered, class war-inspired inequality born of the manipulation of the tax code is threatening democracy because it is destroying the middle class (Krugman, 2006d)

When people fall from the middle class, they become poor. The number of “severely poor” grew 26 percent between 2000 and 2005. The percentage of Americans living in poverty is greater now than at anytime since 1975 (Pugh, 2007). Severe poverty is closely correlated with race. Poverty often transcends generations, becoming “an intergenerational way of life.” (McElroy and Whelan, 2007). But this fact remains hidden in plain sight until a disaster like Hurricane Katrina reveals how many lack the resources to flee.

Statistics highlight “the compassion gap” in America’s approach to poverty. Sociologist Fred Block and his colleagues estimate the poor in America at 20 percent of the population, the number living on less than half the median income. These people find it very difficult to afford the “four H’s”: housing, high-quality childcare, higher education, and health insurance. The respective percentage increase in these items between 1973 and 2003 was 515%, 736%, 679% and 1755% (Block et al, 2006). Such increases cannot be overcome through simple hard work or moral living: redistribution of wealth is necessary to prevent hard-working middle-class Americans being sucked down into poverty.

The key to fighting poverty and sustaining the middle class is not simply providing more opportunity for the less fortunate, as politicians say when they try to mobilize the working class to vote (Herbert, 2006). The key is redistributing wealth. In *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class*, Robert Frank (2007) proposes a steeply graduated tax on consumption to reduce the wealth of the rich and hold down the cost of

things that middle class people think of basics. The Bush tax cuts have put wads more money in the pockets of the rich and their spending makes essentials more expensive for those lower in the class hierarchy (Pizzigati, 2007).

Housing is basic. If you work, you should be able to buy a decent place to live. Homeownership is the *sine qua non* of middle class membership. Programs to help the poor acquire homes have been around for a long time, but because of competitive spending on real estate by the wealthy and consequent higher prices in the housing market, public programs to help people with incomes around the median buy homes are becoming widespread (Murphy, 2005). New York City and other desirable places to live have seen large decreases in the numbers of dwellings that middle-income people, such as teachers, firefighters, and police, can afford (Scott, 2006). Senator Charles Schumer says that government's job in an economy where inequality is accelerating rapidly is the provision of basic needs such as health care, retirement, and education that the market is putting beyond their reach (Leonhardt, 2007).

In sum, inequality in America is at levels not seen since the 1920s. The wealthy have made huge gains, while white and blue collar workers in the bottom 90 percent of the income distribution are suffering downward pressure. Meanwhile, the cost of necessities has risen. Since 2001, oil is up 100 percent, college is up about 44 percent, and health insurance is up 80 percent (Beinhart, 2007). We are told that the US economy is "in recovery," but the economy of ordinary families seems to be stuck "in rehab." Growth is very unevenly distributed – the financial sector has seen the greatest gains – and tax policies that favor the rich have directly and indirectly increased inequality. Corporate profits and worker productivity are up, but wages and salaries have fallen from 53.3 percent of GDP to 45 percent – worth roughly \$132 billion per percentage point (Shulman, 2006) How do working families live in this sort of economy?

## 5. Workers' Precarious Lives

Let's start at work. In a series of lectures given at Yale in 2004, the sociologist Richard Sennett described the transformation of the capitalist American workplace from a source of stability to "a brave new world of short-term employment and relationships" that does not reliably sustain family life through middle age (Meyerson, 2006a).

Three other recent books (Lardner, 2007) describe how pressure from Wall Street financiers is driving firms away from stability, indeed, away from America. To raise profits, firms offshore their business to places with cheaper labor costs, closing US factories or reducing their US workforces. Once begun, downsizing becomes a race to the

bottom where executives vie to cut jobs or lower salaries, raise profit margins, and thus attract the most investment. We now live in an era where layoffs are normalized. "The permanent separation of people from their jobs, abruptly and against their wishes" is now, "standard management practice," a trend that puts us on the road to "permanent disequilibrium." (ibid.).

Is this "manager's capitalism" good for America? While it is certainly good for executives and shareholders, the actual costs of offshoring, devaluing labor, and harsh workplace regimes contribute to social instability and undermine democracy. Take offshoring, for example. A *Businessweek* cover story (Mandel, 2007) reported that statistics purporting to show that there is no damage to the US economy caused by moving jobs abroad are flawed. By overstating both productivity gains and growth in manufacturing, statistics have obscured the damage to US performance. "Phantom GDP," says the story, "raises questions about U.S. competitiveness and 'helps explain why wage growth for most American workers has been weak.'"

Devaluing domestic labor, as offshoring tends to do, may have long-term effects on the economy. According to economic historian Gregory Clark, it is the quality of labor that determines whether a country will attract capital and grow (Cowen, 2006). By treating US workers like disposable parts, corporate leadership is sacrificing the nation's long-term prospects to enhance the short-term bottom line. Indeed, in the last five years, labor's declining share of national income has been "the most important contributor to higher profit margins." (Meyerson, 2006b)

Besides layoffs, devaluation means longer hours and a less humane work environment. Seventy-five percent of workers now eat alone at their desks two to three times a week, cutting down on socializing with colleagues (Weissman, 2006). This trend reinforces the notion that time is money. Colleagues become competitors.

Eating at one's desk is also a kind of hidden overtime. Lots of people are living on the job, with 50 to 60-hour workweeks compulsory for many salaried workers. A third of US workers say they are chronically overworked and half say they would give up pay to work fewer hours if they could (Castle, 2005). The pressure to work more hours will grow as corporate restructuring continues.

That long hours are forced is clear from the increasing number of lawsuits that allege that firms are failing to compensate workers for overtime. The cases revolve around the definition of who is a manager. Managerial employees are exempt from overtime rules. But many of the plaintiffs in these cases have no actual managerial authority. The offending firms include some of the nation's largest and richest companies. They have pockets deep enough to make fighting these cases costly for workers, but even so, many of

these cases are being settled out of court because fighting them is bad for corporate reputations (Masters and Joyce, 2006).

Other illegal labor practices seem to be worth the bad publicity. Most prominent is the suppression of unions. Because keeping wages down is essential to corporate competitiveness, executives will do whatever is necessary to keep unions out. To form a union under the current rules requires a secret ballot vote supervised by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). In the run-up to such elections, managers hold both individual and group mandatory meetings with workers where they use bribery, favoritism, threats, harassment, and pressure to get them to reject the union or face dire consequences, which usually include job loss (Ehrenreich, 2007). Union organizers are often fired outright. One study found that one in five organizers was terminated (Zipperer and Schmitt, 2007). Clearly the workplace is not a democracy, but it needs to become a place where free speech is guaranteed for workers to negotiate for a greater share of the profits they produce (Hartmann, 2006).

In the current age of employment instability, workers fear corporate retribution. Jobs with health care benefits now carry a very high employment rent. Few workers can risk engaging in union activities if it may cost them their jobs. Unskilled workers frequently live payday to payday, without reserves to fall back on. And the current NLRB is clearly on the side of employers (Krugman, 2006j). This situation thwarts enforcement of the labor laws that should protect workers' right to unionize and bargain collectively. Cases currently before the Board may strip many more workers of protections against unpaid overtime (Acuff and Friedman, 2006). Once powerful unions, such as the United Auto Workers (1979 membership: 1.5 million; current membership: 600,000) cannot resist demands for concessions from firms like GM and Ford that totter on the edge of bankruptcy (Maynard, 2006).

Against this grim picture, one ray of hope shines forth from legislation proposed by Representative George Miller (2007) and his 230 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives. The Employee Free Choice Act would eliminate the need for an NLRB-certified election. Instead, if a majority of workers sign union cards, the union becomes a reality. It would open the door to higher wages (union workers make an average of 30 percent more than non-union workers), health care benefits, and pensions. The Act also proposes stiff, new penalties for firms that interfere in workers' decisions to form a union.

Now to precariousness in family, gender, and care issues. Over the last twenty years, Americans have become more isolated from one another. Using the General Social Survey, Lynn Smith-Lovin and her colleagues found that about 25 percent of Americans have no

one to confide in, double that of 1985, and many others have only one or two close confidants (Smith-Loving, McPherson, and Brashers, 2006). Their study supports Robert Putnam's (2000) argument in *Bowling Alone* that the quality of family and community life is declining in the US even as electronic contacts increase via the Internet.

The structure of work, sometimes multiple jobs, makes picnics, family meals and civic involvement more difficult (Vedantam, 2006). "Work-life balance" and "family friendly policy" symbolize firms' recognition that some flexibility must be offered to retain certain skilled workers. Universities are beginning to move in that direction, too (Shellenbarger, 2006, Galinsky, 2006). Still, getting workers to use family friendly policies is difficult because of ideal worker images that valorize men who are 100 percent devoted to the job (Hochschild 1997, Williams 2000). Eighty-six percent of women who have dropped out of the workforce between 2001 and 2005 are reckoned to have done so because of the stress created by inflexible workplace policies that tacitly endorse the ideal worker ideology (Martin, 2006).

On the national level, only the Family Medical Leave Act protects the jobs of workers who need to take time off to have a child or tend to a sick family member. But the leave is unpaid and small firms are excluded (Bernstein and Levin-Epstein, 2006.) Nearly all of the OECD nations offer much more generous leave provisions. It will take leadership to convince business that it can still be profitable if it "take[s] the high road." (ibid.) But pride in being an exception is part of America's malaise.

Care giving is coded as a female chore. So when a family member is sick or dying, or when children are small, it is women who are generally expected to provide care. But as more and more women work, and as the value of their work to their families grows, finding time for care becomes problematic. The result is an expanding "care deficit." Because the "care deficit" is seen as a women's problem it gets much less attention than it deserves, but it is really a societal problem calling for a societal response.

Proposed solutions (Rosen, 2007) include universal health care, fully paid family leave for both parents, affordable housing and child care, the living wage, more flexibility in working hours (including telecommuting and part-time work with benefits), better public transit, and a tax structure that makes the wealthy pay their share to support the civilization they enjoy. "Liberals," Ruth Rosen (ibid.) says, must "place the care crisis at the core of their agenda and take back 'family values' from the right." Women's lives must be viewed as part of the common good.

Vacation time and sick leave are related concerns. Again, America pales in comparison to other nations that legally guarantee national standards for vacation. The right wing has convinced American workers that America isn't rich enough as a nation to



treat workers well, even as the incomes of the top five percent continue to rise. (Moberg, 2007).

The benefits of vacation time include better health and less social inequality. Productivity increases when people take vacations and society as a whole arguably benefits when workers have the peace of mind that comes from guaranteed sick leave. Eighty percent of the lowest paid US workers get no paid sick leave at all (Hebert, 2007, May 15). They have to choose between working when sick (possibly endangering co-workers and customers) or staying home and losing critical pay or even their jobs.

Against the rather modest demand made in a recent legislative proposal, that firms with at least 15 employees provide a week's worth of sick days per year, the business community whines that it would drive up costs (Greenhouse, 2006). But ignoring the needs of families and the health of individuals cannot but compromise the standard of living for all Americans. "What's the economy for, anyway?" asks John de Graaf, national coordinator of Take Back Your Time Day. "Is our economy just for raising the Dow Jones average, or is it to provide healthy and happy kids, families and communities?" The case of American health care provides an answer.

## 6. Health Care Tyranny

With the exception of Iraq, no issue will be more central to the 2008 election than health care. Early in 2007, both George Bush and Dick Cheney had medical procedures performed at public expense. The attitude of the many middle class people struggling with rising health care costs toward the free treatment received by the president and vice president is summed up in a political cartoon that shows Cheney leaving a hospital. Nearby, a legless Iraq War veteran is talking to a reporter. Gesturing to Cheney, the veteran says, "I'll take the health plan he gets."

The president, who is accompanied by a doctor at all times, received a colonoscopy just after declaring that he would veto any expansion of federal funding for children's health insurance. The plan called for increasing federal tobacco taxes to finance care for 3.2 million children who are not currently covered (Lazarus, 2007). Ninety percent of Americans, and more than 80 percent of Republicans, support expanding care for uninsured children (Krugman, 2007c). How can a man who so clearly benefits from publicly provided care, be opposed to providing the same for children, who are uninsured through no fault of their own?

People without insurance – some 47 million Americans, about a third children and about a third with family incomes in the neighborhood of the 2005 median of \$46,326

(Pear, 2007) – are simply ignored by the president and the for-profit US health care system. Under this system, most Americans get health care through their employers. But fewer and fewer employers are providing health benefits because the costs are rising. As they rise, the number of people who cannot afford to pay for their own coverage is going up, adding to the numbers who are uninsured.

Michael Moore's 2007 movie, "Sicko," compares for-profit care in the US, where, for example, a worker who lost two fingers in an accident is given a choice of reattaching one for \$12,000 or the other one for \$60,000, with universal care countries, such as Canada, where a man who cut off all five fingers has them all reattached for nothing (Independent, 2007, Jun. 4). The images of non-Americans who cannot understand why health care should be a commodity are memorable.

However, the real focus of Moore's film are the struggles of insured Americans who cannot get insurance companies to pay for the treatment their doctors recommend. That is, the film is about the 250 million US residents who have insurance, but may be denied treatment because the incentives in a for-profit system encourage denial of care. Indeed, insurance company doctors are rewarded for finding reasons to deny coverage in clients' files (Boffey, 2007).

People question whether the movie is fair. Yet when America is compared to other nations, it ranks 37<sup>th</sup> in health care effectiveness. That outcome costs 16 percent of GDP, about twice the OECD average. (Holland, 2007). The real question, then, is "Why can't a land that spends so much money on health care do a better job?" What inhibits the US from providing the same level of care as other industrialized nations?

The answer, according to Paul Krugman (2007f), is that Americans are fearful. They have been terrorized by a long and thorough intimidation campaign by the insurance industry, which portrays government insurance as inefficient, leading to "rationed" care, long waits, and no choice of doctor. Universal care is seen as the leading edge of socialism or even totalitarianism.

The irony, of course, is that Americans today suffer under the totalitarianism of the for-profit providers. Health insurance costs rise 15 percent per year. Less than 50 percent of Americans now have health care through their employers because *their* premiums are up 90 percent since 2000 (Holland, 2007). Firms and their workers are being forced into a Hobson's choice of buying expensive insurance or going without.

What is more, it turns out that the roughly \$2 trillion spent on health care each year has been the foundation of the alleged economic recovery in the US since 2001. In fact, according to another *BusinessWeek* cover story (Mandel, 2006), only the health care sector, which added 1.7 million jobs between 2001 and 2005, grew during that period. Other

private sector employment was stagnant. Without the health care sector, “the nation’s labor market would be in a deep coma,” wrote Mandel.

With the number of insured Americans falling, why does the insurance industry hire extra employees? Krugman (2006i), a leading analyst of this issue, suggests the additional workers are doing two things: 1) finding reasons to deny or revoke coverage; 2) propping up the service economy. Soon there will be more Americans employed in insurance than in manufacturing. Others (Holland, 2007) agree that the insurance business is functioning as an expensive, government subsidized jobs program in an industry that makes large contributions to presidential election campaigns.

In return, politicians have protected the private insurance industry. President Bush, for example, has proposed tax policies that promote the purchase of high-deductible policies that cover expensive and rare treatments, while ignoring the much more pressing need for cheaper (and much less profitable), preventative care (Krugman, 2006a).

The obvious solution is a single-payer system. Canada, France, Italy, Japan, Great Britain, and Germany, among others, have such a system of universal care. They cover nearly all the residents of their countries, achieve better health outcomes, and do it for much less than the US (Klein, 2007). But don’t people have to wait for care? It seems not. Americans are already waiting longer for care than residents of socialized medicine countries and sometimes the delays cause death (Krugman, 2007g). Insurance company threats to the contrary, these foreign systems are efficient.

As 2008 approaches the push for health care reform is on. Reformers should find it easy to gather allies. Single-payer would increase US firms’ international competitiveness (Walker, 2006). Robert Reich (2005a), who represents the view of many academics, points out that firms only provided health care in the first place because it was an untaxed form of payment that circumvented World War II-era wage controls. He argues that health care should be uncoupled from employment. Universal care would relieve much of the stress and anxiety about job loss. It would also provide care for those who are least able to afford it under the current system.

Taiwan recently made just such a shift to universal care (Krugman, 2005), finding that increasing the percentage of covered citizens from under 60 to almost 100 did not increase the percentage of GDP spent on health care. And as many already know (e.g. Krugman, 2006f, Krugman, 2006b), the US has government-financed health care systems that have low costs of operation and provide high levels of care: the Veterans Health Administration, which cares for veterans of the US Armed Forces, and Medicare, which provides care for Americans over the age of 65.

And yet, despite these domestic success stories and abundant foreign examples of

how to do it better, the US seems stubbornly determined to stick with the high profit potential of treating the sick with private care rather than strengthening the nation (and saving money) by providing cheaper, public preventative care that keeps people healthy. If there is a domestic source of America's malaise, it is the unfounded, anti-government, ideological preference for the private sector seen so clearly in the case of health care.

All the major Democratic candidates for 2008 propose some form of public care (Toner, 2007). But achieving change will be hard. The plans announced by the three front-runners would not replace private care with a government program, but would provide a government program as an option or a parallel system. Senator Barack Obama's plan would guarantee coverage to workers and their families either through the employer or the government program. Employers would be required to pay part of the costs of the public plan. Senator John Edwards' plan is "similar to Medicare available on a regional basis." (Hacker, 2007a) Both Edwards and Obama would pay for part of their plans by abolishing some of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy (Krugman, 2007d). Hillary Clinton's plan is similar and offers "a menu of coverage choices" paid for primarily through tax incentives (Hacker, 2007b). But it is worth noting that none of these proposals calls for replacing private, for-profit care with universal coverage through a single-payer system.

## 7. Skimping on Education, Squandering Human Capital

It is an article of faith among Americans of all political persuasions that education is the path to a better life for individuals, an equal society, and the basis of national strength. Liberals, 26 percent of the electorate (Brooks, 2007) believe, however, that the current levels of inequality are so great, and the public education system so broken, that education does not level the playing field and provide equality of opportunity. What role do they propose for education in the healing of America?

Universal preschool, especially for poor children, has been shown to improve high school graduation and marriage rates, reduce crime, improve earnings potential and keep people out of poverty and off welfare: all in all, a \$17 return for each dollar invested in early schooling, although there are clear differences in outcomes depending on preschool teachers' education levels (Kirp, 2005). More and more states are pursuing universal preschool.

Still, critics of American education wonder if anything can stem the tide of ignorance and hostility toward learning. Many young Americans don't know enough geography to understand America's place in the world. Surveys of geographic literacy show, for example, that in spite of constant press coverage the Iraq War, 60 percent of Americans aged 18-24

cannot find Iraq on a map of the world. Eighty-eight percent cannot find Afghanistan. A third cannot find Louisiana, site of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, and half cannot locate New York State (Buncombe, 2006).

These young people, suggests Roger Cohen (2006), are living in a fantasyland where the landmarks that matter are celebrities, like Paris Hilton, not cities, like Paris, France. Endless artificial banality – video worlds, “American Idol,” reality shows – all of it seems justified, if only because the president himself is living amid illusions. The US is one of only two industrial countries where the younger generation is has less education than the older generation (The Education Trust, 2007).

A third of US high school students fail to graduate, with dropout rates even higher in urban areas. This evident lack of basic competence is a threat to participation in democratic society, says John Simpson, president of the State University of New York at Buffalo (2006). He identifies poor teaching and parental indifference as causes, but goes further, pointing out social conditions, such as discrimination, drugs, and violence, that prevent achievement before children reach high school. In addition to preschool, which seems to offset some of these societal disadvantages, Simpson proposes that universities increase their service to the community and aid student skill development. Thomas Friedman suggests that if we cannot educate our own citizens well enough to sustain our imperial standard of living, we should be offering citizenship to every foreigner who earns a Ph.D. at an American university (Friedman, 2007b).

At the Brookings Institution, the Hamilton Project proposes reforms that would improve teaching. Noting that whether a teacher is certified seems to be irrelevant to the quality of his or her performance in the classroom, the Project calls for an end to teacher certification. In its place, it advocates bonuses for good teachers who agree to teach at schools in poor neighborhoods and a tougher tenure process to get rid of weak teachers (Kristof, 2007). The rationale is that achieving better distribution of good teachers could close the gaps in achievement between rich and poor students that the current system reinforces.

Another suggestion to reduce inequality and rebuild the middle class by broadening access to higher education is to liberalize the way money for college is allocated. College graduates aged 25 to 34 make an average of 37 percent more than those with only high school educations. But many who do graduate from college do so with a load of debt that handicaps them in starting families or buying homes, and many others drop out of college because they cannot afford it. Anya Kamenetz (2005, 2006) has documented the struggles of the college students’ she calls “generation debt” to finance their educations through a federal student loan system that has become increasingly profitable for banks and other

private lenders and increasingly costly for students. The Student Loan Marketing Corporation (Sallie Mae) has become one of the largest for-profit entities in the nation and a major source of donations to the politicians who control education policy, such as John Boehner, Chair of the House Education Committee. He got \$172,000 from Sallie Mae in 2003 and 2004. Kamenetz calls for increasing grants rather than loans, but she also points out that it will not help expand America's middle class to have more college graduates unless there are better jobs for them to fill.

## 8. Energy Flows, Climate Woes, and American Lifestyles

Can lifestyle change industries be the source of such jobs? America's runaway consumer society is an obvious source of damage to the environment and the US is the leading contributor of greenhouse gasses that cause global warming. Can a geographically challenged people understand that their way of living must change because it threatens the planet?

Many of the lifestyle ideals that are driving global climate change (a car in every garage) come from America, but so do many proposals for sustainable ways to live. I survey some of these below.

Addiction to foreign oil is both the reality and the metaphor that describes America's need to heal. America prides itself on independence, yet about 60 percent of its oil is imported. Often this means relying on production in unstable or hostile regions. Forty- two percent of US voters say that reducing this dependence is the most important issue facing the country. That is far more than the 26 percent who think our first priority should be to combat terrorism (Friedman, 2006c). And yet the two are intimately related: America's "war with a violent strain of Middle East Islam [...] is indirectly financed by our consumption of oil." (Friedman, 2006b). Raising fuel-efficiency standards and increasing the gasoline tax so that the price of fuel would compel people to buy efficient cars would spur innovation and reinvigorate America's auto industry.

A fuel-efficient America would weaken petrol-based, authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Venezuela, for when crude oil prices are high due to American consumption, dictators have the money to co-opt and suppress democratic movements in their populations (Freidman, 2006a, Friedman, 2007a). In addition, shrinking the flow of foreign oil to the US diminishes some of the need for the empire of military bases, including permanent bases under construction in Iraq, that are draining America's treasury.

Deployed commercially, substitutes for Middle Eastern oil, such as biofuels and

ethanol, and renewables, such as hydropower, solar, wind, geothermal, and perhaps nuclear, would offer relief from addiction to imported oil and aid the fight against global warming, too. Moving beyond fossil fuels is thus both a national and global security imperative.

However, energy expert Robert Semple (2006b) points out, "The inertia in the present energy delivery system is staggering." Fifty percent of America's electricity comes from coal and it will not be replaced by green alternatives anytime soon. However, there are measures that can be taken now. Semple puts efficiency, "making much better use of the fuels we already have," at the top of the list. Avery Lovins, the guru of "negawatts" – megawatts that do not have to be generated because of more efficient electricity use – agrees that energy efficiency can be realized if we think differently. America is "the Saudi Arabia of nega-barrels," he says, predicting that American can continue to grow and still eliminate all oil use by 2050 (Kolbert 2007). Buying energy efficient devices and buildings costs less than building and running the power plants needed to supply more energy, simultaneously benefiting the environment and the economy (Lovins, 2006).

We can only hope that Lovins is right, for we may now be living in the post "peak oil" era, a time when the diminishing supply of oil collides with increasing demand to produce stunning price rises. The necessary tools for dealing with the problems of this era may exist already: increased fuel economy standards, subsidies to help auto makers develop efficient vehicles, and cellulose-based substitutes for gasoline (Semple, 2006a).

In addition, James Hansen, the US government's chief climate scientist, calls for a moratorium on building coal-fired power plants until ways of sequestering carbon dioxide can be found, putting a price on emissions, studying the stability of ice sheets, and keeping the public honestly informed about climate change risks (Hansen, 2007). The question is whether the necessary investment and leadership for getting these technologies and policies into the mainstream exists. There is considerable doubt that politicians will move on these issues until there is a crisis (Semple, 2006a).

California's example shows that the judicious use of regulation can get energy efficiency and conservation to go hand in hand with economic growth (Krugman, 2007a). Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley agree with Lovins that cutting greenhouse gasses can benefit the economy. By acting now, they say, California will attract investment and create jobs in the industries that will rise up to meet the challenge of global warming (McFarling, 2006). Moreover, California is an example of how solar and other technologies can be used to make households energy self-sufficient. Increased investment in alternative energy will provide more jobs in the future, but it will also begin to change the way people think about powering their lifestyles (King, 2006)

Crisis concentrates the mind. During World War II, victory gardens, carpooling and

hitchhiking (“When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler!”), bicycling, recycling, cohousing, and other cooperative endeavors were manifestations of an ethic of conservation that mobilized the nation to fight (Davis, 2007). The question today is whether the climate crisis can motivate enough people to take counter-cultural ideals of energy conservation, efficiency, and sustainability seriously enough to get them to measure progress and success differently.

Bill McKibben, author of *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (2007), writes that growth, as currently defined, “is no longer making most people wealthier, but instead is generating inequality and insecurity.” Furthermore, growth is straining the environment to such an extent that continued expansion is dangerous, yet the wealth derived from this growth is not making people happier. McKibben argues that the measure of growth ought to be whether changes in the economy build or diminish community, which he sees as the real source of human satisfaction and the basis of sustainability (Knickerbocker, 2007).

Other nations are also seeking to realize economies based on alternatives to global, corporate capitalism. The “solidarity economies” of Latin America are one example of democratic alternatives to global capitalism and state socialism. These economies value diversity of purposes (“not just the maximization of individual gain”) as a way to resist capitalism’s drive to “co-opt and colonize [these] relationships of cooperation and mutual aid.” (Miller, 2006) Alternative visions also motivate the priorities of Bhutan, the Himalayan kingdom that is moving to establish a constitutional democracy in 2008. Its draft constitution charges both the government and individual citizens with stewardship of the environment for the benefit of future generations. Coupled with the kingdom’s celebrated inclusion of indicators for GNH (Gross National Happiness) in its calculations of GDP, Bhutan’s recognition of intergenerational links is another example of how community, family, and solidarity can be the basis for judging the success of an economy (Hesse, 2007).

Can America learn to value communalism more than its addiction to fossil fuels, imported or otherwise? America’s core ideologies continue to be individualism and market fundamentalism. Jared Bernstein (2006) says “You’re On Your Own” – YOYO – thinking makes it harder for Americans to achieve their country because individuals and families are asked to bear more and more economic risk. Bernstein proposes instead, a vision of collective action and collaboration, which he calls WITT – “We’re In This Together.” WITT would use “the tools of government to build a more just society, one that preserves individualist values while ensuring that the prosperity we generate is equitably shared.”

More radical observers, however, such as Garret Keiser (2007), are much less



sanguine that the transformation of the economy and the climate can be anything but another opportunity for the wealthy and well-off to perpetuate their climate-destroying lifestyle. He writes, "The abolition of obscene excess, the equitable distribution of finite resources – these have the same appeal for our movers and shakers as adopting a crack baby has for the infertile members of their club." They will see the need to change how we live as nothing more than "opportunities for outsized gains." As long as rescuing the planet is just another justification for greed, Keizer says, we will fail to recognize that the real meaning global warming is,

that a culture that has as its highest aim the avoidance of anything remotely resembling physical work must change its life. If you want an inconvenient truth, there it is: that the very notion of convenience upon which our civilization rests is a lie that is killing us.

## 9. America's Malaise: A Summary

As seen above, ordinary Americas are increasingly victimized by the growth of a military and economic empire that enriches a tiny minority almost beyond comprehension. Emphasis on continuous global expansion has led to chronic underinvestment at home in education, infrastructure, and care. Expansion abroad has brought American interests into bloody conflict with local cultures. The resulting carnage has simultaneously stained America's international reputation and legitimated patriotically motivated violence in international affairs. Although the tide of US public opinion has finally turned strongly against the Iraq war and George Bush, the president and his war are only the most obvious manifestations of what is wrong with America.

The list of less obvious symptoms is long. Bill Moyers (2006) declares the situation critical, saying, "The American Dream has had its heart cut out, and is on life support." Despite the world's largest GDP, US students rank only 24<sup>th</sup> in math and 15<sup>th</sup> in reading among OECD nations. Infrastructure neglect costs billions in lost time and productivity (and may cost lives, as it did in Minneapolis in August 2007 when a large bridge collapsed). Federal investment in non-defense related sectors has been falling for 25 years. The national debt in 2003 was \$51 trillion dollars – roughly four times GDP and over \$10 trillion more than the net worth of the nation – and yet the Bush administration pushed through tax cuts for the wealthy, whose income gains have risen so that the richest one percent of Americans now control nearly 40 percent of America's wealth, while the average, adjusted-for-cost-of-living, weekly wage for blue-collar workers fell by \$52 a week between 1972 and 2004 (*ibid.*). America's global expansion has left it increasingly

hollow at home.

The seriousness of America's condition is highlighted by comparisons with nations that are doing a better job of achieving their countries. Reformist Americans compare the US to Europe and find it wanting. Writing in *The Washington Post*, Robert Kaiser (2005) asks, "If we Americans are so rich and smart, why can't we treat our citizens as well as the Finns treat theirs?" Finland is a model of egalitarianism, where the children are at the top of world academic assessments, political corruption is the world's lowest, the lifestyle is first on the "sustainability index," the economy is the most competitive, and all of this has come about as the country has reinvented itself during the last 35 years. The Finns, homogenous and hardworking, succeeded with reforms known as The Finnish National Project because their welfare state made people feel secure and their shared culture created a feeling that they were all in the same boat.

Indeed, when it comes to social solidarity, America is behind the times and Europe will likely lead the way forward. In social policy, labor regulation, health care, social equality, even in terms of productivity and contributions to international organizations, European countries are better than equal to the US (Judt, 2005). This is not to deny Europe's problems, it is merely to point out that Europe, after a century of unparalleled slaughter, understands that creating community, both within the EU and elsewhere, is the only way to live.

It is good that some Americans are looking abroad and that there are models of recovery worth considering there. American may soon have its first black or female president and with that person may come greater concern for building community within the US and restoring America's reputation abroad. Nevertheless, the psychology of entrenched and self-centered interests that support empire is a formidable obstacle for reformist politics that urge government-regulated communalism as the solution to America's problems.

## 10. Prescriptions for Leadership

In 2006 and 2007 I lectured to my Japanese university students on threats to the "American Dream," the notion that each generation of Americans can achieve a higher standard of living than the previous one (North, 2006). The lectures, which outlined the increasing polarization of wealth and the crisis of health care, surprised the students. They thought American was a better place. "Why don't America's leaders take action to resolve these problems?" they asked.

As we have seen above, a major reason is the ideologically driven policies of the

radical, neo-conservative, Republican right. Their leadership has consisted of attempting to subjugate reality to a faith-based imperial vision that has no tolerance for opposition, or even debate. As the poll numbers indicate, the policies of that government are now discredited. In the 2008 presidential election Americans will have a chance to vote for something else. Will the choices they find provide healing enough to support the revival of the Reformist Left that Rorty deemed essential for achieving a healthy democracy?

It is currently fashionable to make life lists, lists of things to do, books to read, places to visit before one dies, (Williams, 2007). In that vein, let me close by listing what has been prescribed for the leaders of the next administration to do to heal America.

1. Give up the empire of bases to resolve the contradiction between democracy at home and imperialism abroad. Use some of the savings to atone for past crimes, like the invasion of Iraq, and to promote community between nations and restore US standing in the world. Take seriously the idea of humans as family.
2. Repeal tax cuts for the wealthy and cut taxes for low-income people. Redistribute wealth to increase Median Domestic Prosperity and guarantee all citizens a dignified standard of life through a progressive taxation that moderates extreme polarization.
3. Mandate national, uniform government provision of the people's lifelong needs for health care and education. Lift the burden of risk from individual states, workers, and companies. Teach Americans to imagine contributing to rather than ruling over the global human enterprise.
4. Regulate the workplace, recognizing that the purpose of the economy is to support social life now and in the future. Study how other societies manage this and adopt the best practices available. Protect the rights of workers and consumers to organize.
5. Learn to view the need to change our fossil fuel centered lifestyle as an evolutionary opportunity. We can leave no greater gift to our progeny than sustainable communities and a healthy ecology based on an energy efficient infrastructure.

These prescriptions are similar to those drawn up by others. A list in *Harper's Magazine* (2007, 43-61) stresses restoring governmental integrity through the restoration of the "checks and balances" of the Constitution, greater transparency to guarantee the competence of judges and other appointed officials, adequately funding the federal agencies charged with enforcing environmental laws, and promoting the free flow of accurate scientific and security information. Robert Reich (2005b) adds maintenance of the separation between church and state. Michael Kinsley (2006) sees a need for transparency in elections. Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of *The Nation* (2007) adds public

campaign financing to her list as a way to keep corporate money from twisting elections.

There are ample reasons to doubt whether even unanimity on the left would get these worthy suggestions implemented. Many of these ideas have been around for years without attracting much support. And although Democrats often seem more mature than Republicans, the battle to shape the 2008 Democratic platform is unlikely to rise to the level of an adult conversation about how to deal with the problems we face. There is simply too much pressure to simultaneously appeal to the electorate and business interests (Gillespie, 2007). And because only about 50 percent of eligible voters bother to cast ballots, the real electorate seems to be the corporations that have the wherewithal to buy up political influence. The Democrats' sources of political funds are roughly the same as the Republicans. Finally, there is real doubt about whether liberal prescriptions for healing America will be embraced by either the corporate world or the employed electorate.

This time around, the Republicans are so tainted by eight years of Bush that they will lose, but a Democratic Party victory does not necessarily mean America, or the world of which it is a part, will win in 2008. Simply getting rid of George Bush will not restore America's reputation or slash the defense budget. Nor will a Democratic victory necessarily guarantee the revival of Rorty's pragmatic, reformist left. If Democratic victory does not at least nurture a sense of hope in the possibility of achieving our country that has been all but absent since 2001, then America is likely to continue on the path of imperial decline, obstructing the efforts of relatively conscious humans everywhere to change the history of the world.

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## **Can Anything Be Done?**

### **—Evaluating the Liberal Prescriptions for America's Malaise—**

Scott NORTH

To those who are willing to look the symptoms of America's decline are unmistakable: rapid polarization of wealth and income, imperial military overstretch, worsening foreign debt and trade balances, crumbling infrastructure, inadequate healthcare and education, and the loss of moral leadership and cultural, "soft power" influence. As the US electorate finally awakens from the terrifying nightmare of 9-11, it is abandoning support for the policies of the Bush White House and moving to embrace alternatives, which will likely form the basis for the policies of a Democratic administration in 2009. This paper evaluates a selection of proposed liberal alternatives to current domestic and foreign policies and asks whether they can undo the damage done since 2001. The evidence presented shows that while there is no lack of innovative and intelligent proposals for changing how America lives and acts, there is also no lack of reasons to be pessimistic about the efficacy of those proposed remedies for slowing the rightward movement of the state. Consequently the revival of a "Reformist Left," a social consciousness and civil society capable of promoting social justice and government that is responsive to the needs of non-corporate citizens, remains unlikely at this time.