

# 1 - Overwhelming Issues

Have you ever wondered what the most pressing problems facing our country are? There are lots of choices, aren't there? While the issues change from year-to-year and decade-to-decade, and while each of us would probably come up with a different list and ranking, I believe many of us would agree that the United States faces some huge issues as we enter the technology-driven, 21st century. Here is a sampling of some of those issues.

## Economic Issues



## Education Issues



## Environment Issues



## Government Issues



## Health and Life Issues



## Law and Order Issues



## National Security Issues



## Social Issues



A Nashville FM radio station's dedication to those who lost their lives at Columbine High School summarizes our current state of affairs pretty well. Read [The Paradox](#).

Over the years, I've come to believe that the most significant issue facing the United States is, in fact, none of these and that these issues are only symptoms of a more fundamental problem – one which I believe is the core issue of our time and one which must be addressed in order for these other more visible problems to be made more manageable or resolved and for the United States to survive as we now know it.





### **1. What to do about the United States' quarter-trillion dollar trade deficit.**

In 1999, the U.S. purchased \$255 billion more goods and services from foreign nations than those nations purchased from the United States . In June 2000, our trading deficit was \$30.6 billion.

In 1998, Congress established the Trade Deficit Review Commission to study the nature, causes and consequences of our trade deficits. While the Commission's November 2000 final report contained two widely differing conclusions (a Republican view and a Democratic view), there was general agreement that a large and growing deficit cannot continue indefinitely without negative consequences.

### **2. How to ensure that the Social Security and Medi-Care benefit programs remain solvent as the baby boom generation approaches retirement age.**

According to the latest report from the Social Security's Board of Trustees:

- by 2015 the amount of money put into the Social Security System from payroll taxes will be less than the monies paid out in benefits, and
- by 2037 the Social Security System will be able to pay less than three quarters of the promised benefits, thus pushing millions of low-income retired Americans into poverty.

The report concludes that unless Social Security is reformed, either payroll tax rates will have to increase by up to fifty percent or the system's already meager promised benefits will have to be cut by almost a third.

### **3. How to provide affordable, quality health care for all Americans.**

While America probably has the best medical care in the world, most its citizens don't have access to it for a variety of reasons.

- Few Americans can afford the costs of medical care and need insurance to help them pay for health care.
- A staggering number of Americans, 41 million, cannot even afford the cost of health care insurance and have no health care insurance and thus their access to medical care is limited to clinics. And 8 out of 10 of these 41 million people are employed! - just working for small organizations that can't afford health benefits or self-employed.

- Many Americans are underinsured because of the high cost of health care insurance. Insurance fraud on the part of healthcare providers has contributed to the high costs.
- Many Americans who do have insurance still don't get the care they need because HMO-type insurance organizations place profit over medicine and disallow needed medical procedures and medicines.

#### 4. How to simplify and make more equitable the taxes needed to run state and federal government.

While it is clear that the federal government and state governments need money to operate, it is equally clear that:

- the way they collect that money is too complicated,
- the amount of taxes paid by various individuals and organizations isn't equitable and,
- they don't need as much money as they collect because much of what they spend it on is of questionable value and because their bureaucracies are so inefficient.

In fiscal year 2000, Americans paid over \$2.4 trillion in taxes! This marked the highest peacetime tax burden in history and represented 21% of America's gross domestic product.

It seems ironic that high taxes triggered our breaking away from England to form the United States and yet we pay enormous taxes today that are seemingly accepted by most of us.

Many of us think that the federal and state income tax brackets we are in represents the percentage of taxes we pay but that's not the half of it! A single person living in California who owns a home and makes \$60,000 would pay taxes in the neighbor of 40% or \$24,000 of their income! These taxes would include the following.

<b>Type of Tax (1)</b>	<b>Appr. Amount</b>
U.S. income tax	20% of income
State income tax	9% of income
Property tax	\$3,000/year
Gasoline tax (2)	34%/gallon
Sales tax	7.95% of many purchases
State & federal telephone taxes	% of bill
State & federal gas taxes	1% of bill

1) These don't include estate taxes, or death taxes as they are sometimes called, which seem particularly burdensome in that they tax money that has already been taxed.

2) The California Energy Commission reports that in December 1999 the cost of a \$1.36 gallon of gas in California had the following components: crude oil, 59 cents; refinery margin, 21 cents; dealer margin, 10 cents; and taxes, 46 cents.

3) Here is a list of [other taxes](#) we pay from an email I received.

And to make matters worse, figuring out how much income tax or estate tax one owes is time consuming and expensive. The tax code is convoluted to the point where multiple tax experts come up with different amounts owed for the same individual or corporation.

And taxes just don't collect money, they provide incentives and disincentives for following certain government social policies such as:

- home ownership,
- making contributions,
- not purchasing expensive automobiles,
- discouraging the use of alcohol and tobacco products,
- growing and not growing certain crops and,
- having children and so on and so forth.

In a very real sense, a high tax burden reduces one's freedoms. The freedom to make one's way in this world - the freedom to enjoy the fruits of one's labor.

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### A. What to do about a faltering K through 12 public education system.

Educated citizens are the underpinnings of a democracy, yet our public education system struggles.

1. Teachers are underpaid;
2. Class size is too large for learning;
3. The lack of safety at some schools is not conducive to learning;
4. Schools are being asked to compensate for a lack of parenting;
5. There is grade inflation;
6. There are pressures to "socially promote and graduate", rather than hold back students who haven't met the grade-level standards;
7. Teachers' unions balk at the notion of teacher evaluation;
8. The manner of promoting teachers and principals "makes excellence a matter of chance, not design";
9. There is a rarity of great schools for minority and disadvantaged children;
10. The focus of teaching is more and more on passing standardized tests rather than on learning; and
11. With the tenure system, it's almost impossible to remove unfit teachers.

And with all these issues, *"whenever a worthwhile school proposal or legislation initiative is under consideration, those with a vested interest in the educational status quo use political muscle to block reform."* - USA Today

Below is an email sent to me by a seventeen year old Boy Scout describing a community project he had just completed for his Eagle Scout badge. The fifteen spelling and grammar mistakes in this brief note don't speak well for our education system. See how many you can find.

"Subject: Rotery Club/ eagle scout prject

Hello, My name is John. I have just done my eagle scout project at a

near by Convalescent home. I redid the bird aviary inside the home. The old

bird aviary was in ruins, the paint was chipping, weeds were growing out of

the rocks, and all but one bird has died. Sense the resents has little to do

during the day watching the birds is something they do to pass the time. But

lately, watching the bird die and the conditions going down in the Aviary has been depressing.

To help I remove the rocks and top level of dirt, sterilized and repainted the walls, laid down fresh grass, put in a bird bath, built bird houses and nesting houses, installed a roof screen to keep out bugs, put in hanging perches and toys, and introduced new birds to the aviary. Now residents of the home crowd around the aviary and watch in amusement all day. Visitors have complemented on the new Aviary constantly and some stop and watch for a while them self's."

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## Environment Issues



How to prevent further pollution of, and to clean up, our polluted rivers, lakes, oceans and groundwater.

### *The Ocean*

Worldwide, 14 billion pounds of garbage are dumped into the oceans each year. This outweighs the pounds of fish harvested by 3 to 1. The amount of garbage in our oceans has resulted in a) harvesting being restricted or banned on shell-fishing grounds, b) tons of garbage washing up on beaches, and c) the poisoning of fish and other salt water creatures.

The number of beach closures in the U.S. doubled between 1999 and 2000.

Ninety percent of the nation's pollution-filtering wetlands have been destroyed and 60 percent of the world's coral reefs are threatened by pollution, sedimentation and over-harvesting.

The [Surfrider Foundation](#) is a non-profit organization that works to protect our oceans, waves, and beaches. In their 2002 State of the Beach report, Surfrider indicates that "California beaches were closed or had warnings almost 6,000 times during 2000, nearly twice as many times as in 1999.

### *Rivers*

Aniston, Alabama PCBs Monsanto. healthy fish die in minutes when submerged, chickens they raise had PCBs.

### *Lakes*

### *Groundwater*

Scientists estimate that each year up to seven million Americans become sick from contaminated tap water, which can also be lethal.

MTBE is a chemical used in gasoline. It is deadly in small amounts. MTBE has leaked into our groundwater drinking supplies in many places throughout the U.S. as a result of old gasoline storage tanks. Some communities such as Santa Monica, California have had to shut down their own water supplies and import water via truck because of high levels of MTBE in their ground water!

## **How to maintain adequate supplies of drinking water.**

We are beginning to see shortages of water needed for drinking, for industry and for agriculture. These shortages are being driven by the increase in population and the fact that more and more of our sources of drinking water become polluted and with the natural changes in weather patterns.

Even in the Great Lakes region that contains 90% of the fresh water in the United States, officials and environmentalists are concerned the increasing demand on waters that feed the Great Lakes could result in dangerously low water levels and harm fishing and other animal habitats.

## **What is a proper balance between growth versus the quality of life and the preservation of other life and our natural resources?**

In November 1992, the Union of Concerned Scientists met in Washington DC where 1,600 of the senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel Laureates endorsed a statement entitled, "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity." It stated: "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated."

Here are a few resources dealing with this issue:

The Vermont-based [Sustainability Institute](#) is a think-tank dedicated to sustainable resource use, sustainable economics and sustainable community. They provide information, analysis, and practical demonstrations that can foster transitions to sustainable systems at all levels of society, from local to global.

The [Center for a New American Dream](#) helps Americans change the way they consume to improve quality of life, protect the environment, and promote social justice.

[The Nature Conservancy](#) works with communities, businesses and individual citizens to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

## **How to reduce noise and light pollution so we can enjoy our natural world**

### *Noise Pollution*

"Noise from road traffic, jet planes, jet skis, garbage trucks, construction equipment, manufacturing processes, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and boom boxes, to name a few, are among the unwanted sounds that are routinely broadcast into the air.

The problem with noise is not only that it is unwanted, but also that it negatively affects human health and well-being. Problems related to noise include hearing loss, stress, high blood pressure, sleep loss, distraction and lost productivity, and a general reduction in the quality of life and opportunities for tranquility."

- from the [Noise Pollution Clearinghouse](#) website

A book, *Noise & Health*, edited by Thomas H. Fay and published by The New York Academy of Medicine (1991) presents a critical and comprehensive review of available world literature on the effects of noise on all of the body's systems. It defines noise and its sources, documents the specific health hazards of noise on the body and indicates needs for further research.

### *Light Pollution*

Light Pollution happens because of poorly designed and improperly aimed light fixtures called luminaries. Luminaries that do not offer adequate shielding usually spill wasted light into the sky and across property lines where it does not benefit anyone. When light spills into the sky, it reflects off of tiny airborne dust and moisture particles and creates what is known as skyglow.

Skyglow not only affects the scientific research of astronomers but It also affects everyone else who simply enjoys a dark night sky abundant with stars. The starry night sky has all but disappeared in many areas and has been effected to varying degrees for nearly 90% of Americans! With dark-adapted eyes, we should be able to see at least 2,600 stars under mildly polluted residential skies on any clear moonless evening. In remote rural areas that have not suffered urban sprawl and over development, it is possible to see four times that many stars on a clear night. Today, in most urban areas, and now in even many suburban and rural areas fewer than 100 stars are visible in the night sky. Most children born today will never know the splendor of a star filled night sky and that alone is tragic.

Light Pollution also robs some of their desire and need for a sound night's sleep when artificial illumination coming from poorly aimed and unshielded light fixtures shines glare into our windows at night. It has become difficult to achieve a dark bedroom at night even with blinds, shades and room darkening drapes.

There is also some research to suggest that too much artificially generated light at night can have very adverse affects on our health by disrupting natural hormone (i.e. melatonin) production that our bodies require!

### **How to reduce air pollution.**

Air pollution is a particularly important and difficult issue. It's particularly important because all living things require air to live and because dirty air causes lung disease and cancer in humans; it poisons rivers and lakes; damages trees; and kills wildlife. Polluted air is a particularly difficult issue because 1) it's not something we can easily get away from, 2) it's not always easy to see, 3) it affects so many living things, 4) the winds carry it into areas not responsible for polluting it, and 5) there are many ways nature and man pollute the air - both indoors and outside.

Natural air pollution results from forest and grass fires, wind-driven dust storms, and volcanic activity. Man made pollutions comes in forms such as acid rain, smog, and flyash (the ash particles that result from the coal-based generation of electricity). Air pollution is aggravated because of four developments: increasing traffic, growing cities, rapid economic

development and industrialization.

With an increased emphasis on energy-efficient housing, modern homes have less ventilation and an increasing problem with indoor pollutants from volatile organic compounds like solvents and chemicals found in products like perfumes, air fresheners, furniture polish, moth repellents; tobacco smoke; pesticides; biological pollutants such as allergens; formaldehyde; asbestos; and radon.

More than 100 US cities still violate federal clean-air standards, mainly because of the increase in the number of automobiles and the trend toward SUVs.

**How to deal with the garbage we create.**

The average American generates about 4 pounds of solid trash per day. This adds up to big trouble for the environment. Americans are generating waste products faster than nature can break them down and using up resources faster than they can be replaced.

Most states are facing a crisis as garbage overburdens landfills. This situation creates groundwater and soil contamination issues.

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## Government Issues



A. **What services should our government of provide.**

B. **How can we make our government more efficient, service-oriented and accountable.**

The amount of taxes we pay for government services doesn't match the quality of service we receive. Like teacher tenure, civil service is the biggest barrier to government streamlining.

C. **How to reduce the influence of special interest groups on elected officials that is allowed because of current campaign finance laws.**

Unless candidates for elected office are independently wealthy, they need to raise money to finance their campaign. For example, the average money spent by winning Senators is \$ , by winning members of the House of Representative \$ and of a Governorship \$ . State and local positions cost less but are still expensive.

The problem is twofold. First, the bulk of State and National candidate campaign money comes from Special Interest Groups. This means, and has resulted in, Special Interest Groups influencing decisions of national importance. Unfortunately, while the decisions they influence are almost always in "their" best interest, they are often not in the nation's best interest. The second half of this problem is that the Congress and the President don't have the courage to pass legislation that would stop these campaign finance practices. Why, well because these are the same individuals who accept and are elected because of the SIG money. How will it change?. Only when a real leader is elected president or until we the citizens make it an issue during elections.

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How to structure a health care system that properly balances cost and human care.

*Patient Care*

A 2003 study in 12 metropolitan areas suggested that physicians provide appropriate health care only about half the time.

When should a pregnancy be allowed to be aborted and if so who should make that choice.

Should individuals be allowed to assist others end their lives?

Should we allow the cloning of humans?

How to allocate 'scarce' research dollars to the plethora of diseases we face.

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**How to deal with a litigious society that has created a liability insurance crisis and led to law suits as a way to make money and to set policy.**

Frivolous lawsuits, unjustified and outrageous jury awards and the threat of litigation are destroying the integrity of our democracy and are an affront to the best in all of us.

Frivolous lawsuits waste our energies that could be spent on matters of importance. The punitive damages juries award take the heart and fairness out of our legal system. The threat of litigation is edging us closer to extortion every day. Here is a snippet from an article called [Suing Like Crazy](#) in the January 2000 Reader's Digest.

**How to reduce the violence and resulting crime, particularly gun-involved crime.**

It's interesting what we as a nation "accept". In the U.S., someone is rapped every 21 seconds; there is an assault every 6 minutes (isn't a rape an assault?); someone is robbed every 38 seconds; and a murder takes place every 25 minutes!

**How to deal with an overburdened legal system that promotes plea-bargaining and makes a mockery of the notion of constitutionally-required speedy trials.**

**How do we improve the jury system so that juries are more representative of the general population.**

**How to balance the value of new technologies with our right to personal privacy.**

**How to reduce the amount of insurance fraud.**

#### *Auto Insurance Fraud*

The California Department of Insurance estimates that fraud add \$330 to \$400 a year to each auto insurance policy. These frauds included the "hard" frauds where professionals scheme to cause an accident or fake an injury where innocent motorists are the victims, and the "soft" frauds where ordinary policyholders exaggerate legitimate claims, have cars intentionally "stolen" and misrepresent information on their policies.

#### *Homeowners/Condo Insurance Fraud*

What types of weapons should citizens be allowed to own/carry.

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**How to prevent catastrophic terrorist acts in an era where acquisition of destructive and lethal weapons and biological and chemical agents is getting easier and easier.**  
September 11, 2001 should have taught us a lot about how vulnerable we are to terrorism. We need to ensure that we have laws and appropriate penalties that cover the types of activities that facilitate terrorism. For instance, currently it is only a misdemeanor to create fake identification and papers. And as has been widely documented, our monitoring of individuals who are in the country on visas is virtually nonexistent.

**How to create a military capability that can protect the U.S. and which can attract and maintain top-notch individuals.**

**How to curb the theft of American Technology.**

The Department of Defense continues to be heavily criticized for being too lenient in its issuance of security clearances. A report revealed that clearances were regularly given to employees of defense contractors with long histories of financial problems, drug use, alcoholism, sexual misconduct or criminal activity.

**When should the United States get involved in international crises?**

**How to ensure our national secrets are kept safe.**

**How to become less dependent upon foreign sources of oil**

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## Social Issues



**How to increase the number of Americans that vote.**

xx% of Americans or approximately xxx Americans are eligible to vote. Of those eligible to vote only yy% actually register to vote. Of those who are eligible and who register to vote only zz% percent vote. That means that out of every 10 adults you see, xx of them decide our future.

**How to encourage a more responsible media in a competitive environment without affecting the need for a strong free media.**

**How to deal with our differences in ways the ensure equal treatment and opportunities for all Americans while still encouraging our differences - and doing so without burdensome legislation.**

**How to ensure the privacy of each citizen in an age where technology enables the instantaneous and widespread acquisition and dissemination of personal information.**

"According to United States and European intelligence experts, a massive electronic intercept program called Project Echelon scans all Internet traffic, cell phone conversations, faxes and long-distance telephone calls - virtually every type of electronic communication - looking for evidence of terrorist activity, military threats, and transnational crime." - *PC World, May 2000*

While the project's intention seems valid, the potential for misuse is huge as this intelligence project apparently operates in total secrecy.

**How to ensure that each American has hope.**

Texas Governor and presidential candidate George W. Bush summed up this issue well in his acceptance speech at the 1999 Republican convention.

"But our new economy must never forget the old, unfinished struggle for human dignity. And here we face a challenge to the very heart and founding premise of our nation.

A couple of years ago, I visited a juvenile jail in Marlin, Texas, and talked with a group of young inmates. They were angry, wary kids. All had committed grownup crimes. Yet when I looked in their eyes, I realized some of them were still little boys.

Toward the end of conversation, one young man, about 15, raised his hand and asked a haunting question... "What do you think of me?" He seemed to be asking, like many Americans who struggle ... "Is there hope for me? Do I have a chance?" And, frankly ... "Do you, a white man in a suit, really care what happens to me?"

A small voice, but it speaks for so many. Single moms struggling to feed the kids and pay the rent.

Immigrants starting a hard life in a new world. Children without fathers in neighborhoods where gangs seem like friendship, where drugs promise peace, and where sex, sadly, seems like the closest thing to belonging. We are their country, too.

And each of us must share in its promise, or that promise is diminished for all. If that boy in Marlin believes he is trapped and worthless and hopeless -- if he believes his life has no value, then other lives have no value to him -- and we are ALL diminished.

When these problems aren't confronted, it builds a wall within our nation. On one side are wealth and technology, education and ambition. On the other side of the wall are poverty and prison, addiction and despair."

**The place in society of gay and lesbian couples as compared to heterosexual married couples.**

**How to cope with an increasing attitude of not taking responsible for our actions, of being victims and of getting something for nothing.**

**How to ensure that the gap between the haves and the have-nots get smaller, not larger.**

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# The Paradox

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy it less.

We have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, but less time; we have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge, but less judgment; more experts, but more problems; more medicine, but less wellness.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much; love too seldom, and hate too often. We learned how to make a living, but not a life; We've added years to life, not life to years.

We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor.

We've conquered outer space, but not inner space; we've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul; we've split the atom, but not our prejudice; we have higher incomes, but lower morals; we've become long on quantity, but short on quality.

These are the times of tall men, and short character; steep profits, and shallow relationships.

These are the times of world peace, but domestic warfare; more leisure, but less fun; more kinds of food, but less nutrition.

These are the days of two incomes, but more divorce; of fancier houses, but broken homes.

It is a time when there is much in the show window and nothing in the stockroom; a time when technology can bring this letter to you, and a time when you can choose either to make a difference or just hit delete.

*- by Dr. Moorehead a former pastor of Overlake Christian Church in Redmond, Washington in 1990 - later published in 1995 in his book WORDS APTLY SPOKEN.*

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Dedicated by Nashville's 95 WSM-FM to the memories of those who lost their lives at Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999 and to the family and friends who are left behind.

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