

THE EDGER- TON ESSAYS



AMERICAN
COMPASS

**PERSPECTIVES FROM
THE WORKING CLASS**

**ETHICS
AND
PUBLIC
POLICY
CENTER**

A Project of American Compass and the Ethics and Public Policy Center

EST



2020

AMERICAN COMPASS

Our Mission

To restore an economic consensus that emphasizes the importance of family, community, and industry to the nation's liberty and prosperity—

REORIENTING POLITICAL FOCUS from growth for its own sake to widely shared economic development that sustains vital social institutions.

SETTING A COURSE for a country in which families can achieve self-sufficiency, contribute productively to their communities, and prepare the next generation for the same

HELPING POLICYMAKERS NAVIGATE the limitations that markets and government each face in promoting the general welfare and the nation's security.

AMERICAN COMPASS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with headquarters at 300 Independence Avenue SE, Washington, DC 20003.

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THE EDGERTON ESSAYS

Today's public square is too often closed to those without a narrow set of credentials. Politicians and pundits in Washington are consumed with ideological battles far removed from the day-to-day concerns of American workers and their families, and often seem incapable of even understanding them. Our policy debates are poorer for it, our policymakers less informed, and our fellow citizens excluded.

* * *

The **Edgerton Essays** are a joint project of American Compass and the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

They feature working-class Americans sharing their perspectives on what they wish policymakers knew about the challenges facing their families and communities.

The Edgerton Essays are named for Jim Edgerton, the subject of Norman Rockwell's famous 1943 painting, "Freedom of Speech." Rockwell depicts the farmer rising to speak at his small community's town meeting, with his neighbors looking on respectfully. That opportunity to speak, and that respect, are too often missing today. We hope that projects like this one can provide a model for their return.

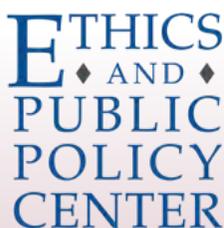


Table of Contents

9 **FOREWORD**
CHRIS ARNADE

16 **FAMILY**

**The Relationships That Don't Fit
on a Spreadsheet**
MARY THOMPSON

**On Family Policy, Proceed with
Great Caution**
ROBIN TAYLOR

Making It Easier to Make Ends Meet
HANNAH KETCHAM

**"Family Policy" Should Include
Caring for Maternal Health**
BIANCA LABRADOR

Enabling Families to Support Each Other
MECHELL ROACHE-JOHNSON

32 **COMMUNITY**

Do They Even Know Who They Represent?
ANGEL BERNARD

Don't Talk to Us Like We're Idiots
GUY STICKNEY

What I Wish Our Politicians Knew
SHEILA WILKINSON

**Social Security Was Supposed
to Be Secure**

NANCY MERICAL

**Does Anyone in Power Notice When
Government Services Fail?**

DOROTHY RAMSEY

46

WORK

COVID's Toll on the American Dream

RUBY NICOLE DAY

How Essential Are the 'Email Job' Caste?

GORD MAGILL

A Dream Achieved—Through Mere Luck

PETER MARTUNEAC

Our Policies Are Failing Working Mothers

KELLY NICOLE

When Work Doesn't Seem to Pay

SASHA BURNS

63

COMMENT

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

71

CONCLUSION

PATRICK T. BROWN

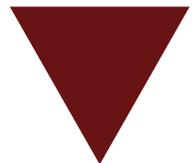
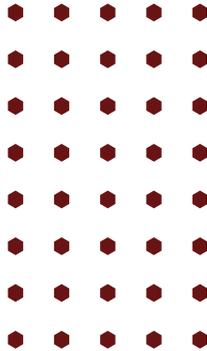


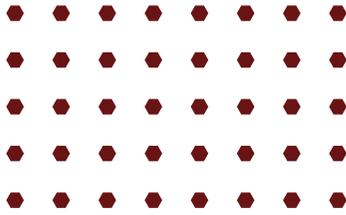
artist and
skateboarder

stay-at-home
mother of 3
children

retiree, church volunteer,
and part-time arts
theater bookkeeper

widow with 2 adult
children and local
food pantry volunteer





head of local
writers guild

former ballet
dancer

trucker

husband, father,
and former U.S.
Marine

homeless shelter case
manager supervisor

cardiothoracic
nurse and mother
of 5 children

farm management
teacher and farm
co-op coordinator



FOREWORD

CHRIS ARNADE

When I started driving around America, photographing people, collecting their stories, and sharing them online, I kept waiting for someone I spoke with to push back, to get upset about an attention they later regretted. That never happened.

Instead, I heard frustration from people whose stories I chose not to share, out of limited space, or because I worried the publicity might harm them.

Upon returning home, my phone would light up with texts asking, “Have you run my story yet?”, “Where can I go to see it?”, and “Please. The minute you put it up, send me a link. My mom wants to see my story.”

When I responded saying, “I am sorry, but I had to cut out your interview,” I would get a stream of sad emojis, or “Dangs!”, and even the occasional, frustrated, “Damn. Why did you even bother talking to me?”

People want to be heard, especially people who are rarely heard. And most Americans are rarely heard.

Instead, a select few Americans are heard all the time, over and over: The pundit class, who have Important degrees from Important colleges, which provides them with Important platforms to air their views.

We in the pundit class (I am one) don't ever seem to shut up. Writing thinkpiece after thinkpiece, going on TV show after TV show, subjecting the rest of America to our thoughts about everything, including our thoughts about what Americans think and, our favorite topic, what they should think.

Entrance into the pundit class is highly restricted. It requires having the right credentials and knowing the right words. To get those, you have to spend your early life weaving through a series of ever more selective institutions where you learn how to speak and, more importantly, what you can speak about.

Getting into these institutions isn't easy, unless you happen to be born into the right family. Then it is as easy as falling out of bed. For almost everyone else, it requires an early and intense self-dedication to a narrow goal, borrowed money, and lots and lots of luck.



We in the pundit class (I am one) don't ever seem to shut up. Writing thinkpiece after thinkpiece, going on TV show after TV show, subjecting the rest of America to our thoughts about everything, including our thoughts about what Americans think and, our favorite topic, what they should think.

Making matters worse, the pundit class emerges from their weird and narrow pipeline into an isolated bubble. They are physically cut off from the majority of Americans who they claim to care about and speak for.

They stick tightly within their clique, spending most of their time sequestered in their apartments, homes, and offices, and every now and then shuffling between a few select buildings in a few select neighborhoods in a few select cities, where they talk with people just like themselves, nodding to each other about their shared

and very correct opinions, while drinking and eating the latest bespoke whatever.

They rarely have to deal with the unheards, beyond when they need their food delivered, or to be protected from physical harm, or chauffeured from place to place. Consequently, their views about what America thinks, and should think, have all the insight of a graduate school seminar filled with dreary facts, numbers, and graphs; because that is their lifeline to the rest of America—numbers in all their various forms, but mostly in statistics and polls. The fake open-mindedness of “my Uber driver told me...” only goes to show they have little else to grab onto.

* * *

This cloistered pundit class is not only inept but also dangerous, because it is intertwined with the political class who write the rules everyone else has to live with. The people who keep our country going, who grow, harvest, and process our food, fight our wars, police our streets, care for our children, clean our offices, keep our lights on, build our homes, and deliver our stuff. (Oddly, the people making the rules don’t feel a strong obligation to follow them.)

For a democracy to survive, it needs to hear all voices, no matter how uncomfortable. Otherwise, the majority’s frustration will grow and grow until it turns into an angry, reckless, and destabilizing force.

This Edgerton anthology is an attempt to at least start by welcoming some of those voices into the conversation. An attempt to collect thoughts, essays, and ideas, from people the cloistered class rarely listens to, but relies on for their health, safety, and comfort. The people who allow them to sit in their offices composing the next thinkpiece, the next piece of legislation, the next PowerPoint presentation, the next tweet, the next

academic report, all while ignoring the consequences of their actions.

Reading through the essays reminds me of my ten years driving around America talking to the unheard “normies,” hearing soliloquies from the heart, sometimes said in halting words, because the speaker is confused why someone wants to listen to them and pretty sure it will bring them scorn, because it almost always has.

I heard lots of things, some crazy, some beautiful, some conspiratorial. No one person changed how I think but, after listening to all of them, my entire way of thinking had changed. Instead of seeing everything in a spreadsheet, I was hearing real stories from real people. I was seeing the individual numbers that made up the statistics we in the pundit class love so much.

Like then, a lot of what I read in the essays I don't fully agree with, some I find uncomfortable, but what I do agree with is what they all share: a frustration with our very unequal status quo. An anger, sometimes intense, sometimes resigned, at the cluelessness and heartlessness of those of us who are given a platform to speak. At the cloistered, credentialed class of pundits and politicians.

There are many lines that capture that ethos. Quotable moments. I could pluck one from each essay. Things our pundits and politicians need to hear, every day, like:

“The lesson learned from my life thus far seems to be that the American Dream is within reach if only you'll fight in Uncle Sam's wars, and even then, you better be one of the lucky ones to survive unscathed, both physically and mentally.”

and

“I know there will never be a perfect system, but I wish there were a way to ensure people who are literally working themselves to death get some relief and people in need of social services actually get served.”

and

“With so much chaos in our streets and change in society, we need to support parents and make sure that they can always choose to support their child, no matter what. Until we are all treated equally and fairly, we have failed as a society. We need to give people the chance to make mistakes, explore and discover themselves. That is freedom, and that is what America is all about.”

I could go on and on but the point isn't any one quote, or any one essay, it is their totality and the broad themes that emerge from the perspectives of so many, very different people: that the system we technocratic pundits have built for ourselves isn't working for them.



Instead of seeing everything in a spreadsheet, I was hearing real stories from real people. I was seeing the individual numbers that made up the statistics we in the pundit class love so much.

Turning everything into a soulless data point masks the immense losses our country has been dealing with, from things that we can't, or don't measure. Like community, family, and faith. Being physically and intellectually cloistered has allowed us to ignore the ugly secondary and tertiary consequences of the policies we advocate for.

When you close a factory, because efficiency and profits, communities die, families fall apart, churches close, and drugs and suicide fill the void. People's very sense of who they are is destroyed. Our markets do not consider that, but surely we need to. People are not sims in a pundit game of Sim Country.

What they are is nuanced souls imbued with various hopes, dreams, desires, and opinions. Or to put it in cold language the pundit class can recognize, they are individual agents imbued with "different, complex, and non-rational utility functions." Imagine that!

Americans are also imbued with a great capacity to cope and deal with pains greater than I could imagine. Able to endure despite sufferings and frustrations big and small. Able to hold tightly to a dignity embedded in strong families, and still nurtured in churches and self-made communities scattered across the nation.

Americans are still building meaningful and dignified lives beyond the material.

So, after ten years of listening, despite hearing immense frustration, I also saw that, beneath it all, Americans possess extraordinary resilience and a fundamental decency. This allowed me to come away from the experience with a glimmer of hope.

I hope readers of this anthology will as well. ■

Chris Arnade is the author of Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America.

FAMILY

17

**The Relationships That
Don't Fit on a Spreadsheet**

MARY THOMPSON

20

**On Family Policy, Proceed
with Great Caution**

ROBIN TAYLOR

23

**Making It Easier to Make
Ends Meet**

HANNAH KETCHAM

25

**“Family Policy” Should Include
Caring for Maternal Health**

BIANCA LABRADOR

28

**Enabling Families to Support
Each Other**

MECHELL ROACHE-JOHNSON

The Relationships That Don't Fit on a Spreadsheet

MARY THOMPSON

A few nights ago, several of my six (mostly grown) children were around the dinner table, reminiscing about the days when their maternal grandparents would care for them. Their fondest memories were the little moments you'd think would have gone unnoticed: "Nana knew exactly how much milk to pour in my bowl of Cheerios," said one, while another recalled that "Pa was always first in the pick-up line on Tuesdays, and always had a spy or military novel in the front seat." It's true; Nana has always hated to waste any food, and Pa would always leave an hour early to make sure he wouldn't be late greeting his grandchildren in the schoolyard.

Now, my parents are the ones who need assistance. They still live in their own home, but neither can drive or manage their daily tasks. Five of their seven children live within an hour's drive from their home; all of us use our varying time, treasure, and talent to support them. Nana and Pa no longer buckle grandchildren into car seats; now there are times they need someone to help them buckle in. Life has come full circle.

I made sure to share my children's priceless recollections with my parents, which brought them joy. But there's a deeper reality to them as well. They show in a small way one of the components people often miss when they talk about the new realities of family life in America—the great value of regular contact and interactions with extended family who love one another.

My children have endured the terrible consequences of watching their parents' marriage fracture and fall apart.

In the midst of all the heartache and loss, they were fortunate to retain, and clearly relish in all its breathtaking simplicity, the comforting predictability, stability and love that saturated those moments with Nana and Pa. There is no price tag that could be placed on those cherished times. Do our nation's think tanks consider those moments when devising policy?

I have little time to devote to studying tax incentives, or family policy, never mind comparing the features of one proposal versus another. My days and mind are filled with all that accompanies raising, caring for and loving my six children. For many years, I've raced from one ballet studio to another, trying to cobble together a teaching schedule that can support my children while allowing me to be home as much as possible. Without grandparents, aunts, uncles, and generous friends, it would have been impossible to manage. No government program can replicate those relationships. Could a tax credit replace the stories and observations my children reminisced about at dinner?

As our nation slowly comes out of the daze of a year that saw so much personal and professional loss, perhaps we have all reconsidered the meaning of family and relationships. Knowing that our elderly were so alone—whether in quarantine at home or in assisted living, or most tragically in a hospital bed—is excruciating. At the same time, there were new parents who did not have those experienced family hands around to give them a break, while reassuring them that they, too, would survive those sleepless nights with a colicky baby. But, even before COVID, how many grandparents were unable to be with and hold those newborns in the first days of wonderment just because they could not take time off from their job, or were separated by thousands of miles?

It seems that our society has become fascinated with developing ways to pay others to be hands-on with

our family members. From infant day care to elderly housing, there is a “program” to meet the day-to-day needs of our loved ones. Of course, that is necessary for some. Not everyone is as fortunate as I was, to have people around me who knew and loved my children. However, perhaps policymakers need to think of ways to encourage, rather than discourage, keeping family members in their homes more.

What could that look like? Maybe more housing options with attached apartments? Tax benefits for families who rely on extended family to watch their children instead of sending them to day care? I’m no expert; I just hope some politicians and writers think about what this could look like in practice.

Other families might have memories of vacations to Disney World or summers at a Cape Cod cottage—those have never been part of our experience. And that’s okay. Instead, we have more priceless memories of the quiet moments spent together, as a family. I know that the memories and stories shared at our dinner table were of utmost importance, and know so many families have the same innate desire to experience similar times with their extended families as as part of their American Dream. It’s a dream very much worth having. ■

Mary Thompson is the mother of six children and a former professional ballet dancer.

On Family Policy, Proceed with Great Caution

ROBIN TAYLOR

The new American Compass “Home Building” blueprint on policies for buttressing the American family was thrilling to read, and it reminded me of the earnestness and passion of me and my friends 35 years ago. I sense a reawakening of that same youthful excitement and energy for supporting families from writers like Lyman Stone, Patrick Brown, and Helen Andrews. Yet my initial reaction is to say, “proceed with great caution.”

I remember when we first had kids, a lot of us new parents would have discussions about “What kind of diet are you feeding your kids? Which toys or movies do you allow them to play with or watch? How are you disciplining that strong-willed child?” And there was always a tone of subconscious judgment that would go through the air, as somebody would imply that you weren’t doing “family” right, that you were out of step with today’s world. Most of us just wanted to find a good spouse, earn an honest living, have children, and lead a godly life. But the culture was moving further and further from a traditional view of marriage and family. By the 2000s, it felt like every aspect of American culture was going down the tubes, and fast.

There were fewer intact families, neighborhoods were empty because of smaller families, and every child was treated as “gifted,” so organized sports or academic tutoring consumed the family’s every waking minute. You had to live in a “McMansion” and own an SUV (or two), and make sure both parents were working to be able to afford it. People were running themselves ragged, but they didn’t have relationships—discussions were

always on the superficial, happy-talk level. For a while, we too bought into the lie that busyness will make you happy, and got sucked into volunteering and organizing and letting ourselves be taken away from time with the family. But after that we were treated as “that homeschooling family,” the “weirdos” with five kids.

Without changing the culture, you’ll only see more of that attitude. You have to help people be willing to stand up and opt out. Looking back, an attitude that pushed both parents into the workforce meant that there were no strong mothers at home to help provide that good example to the young ones. There was no overall sense of guidance by our parents or the mainstream society. (And outside the mainstream, there were different problems—even though five kids was normal in homeschooling communities, we’d still get treated as outsiders because we allowed our kids to eat McDonald’s and read *Harry Potter*.)

In fact, more government involvement in raising kids opens the door to even worse problems. The State yearns to control every aspect of your family and everybody just goes along with the program. We all have dreams and notions of what we think we want for a family, yet we don’t have a clue of how to achieve them, and the State is happy to take over. Without a cultural reawakening you’ll just arouse that judgement over how to “parent” the “right way” that seems to pervade from all angles of society for anyone who does not fit into the right political, educational, economic, or religious category.

I remember my first well-check after giving birth. The nurse informed me how I needed help parenting (despite there being no need or signs of distress) and was quick to promote formula when I initially had some difficulty breastfeeding. Later, I continued to receive postcards from the Health Department for parenting classes. My husband and I didn’t need help parenting or financial assistance. We just need politicians to stay out of the

way. Even in our divided, stressful times, community and church need to be there to help guide and support families. We don't need, and don't want, government to step in.

Having many children today is extremely difficult. It is a continuous battle of dying to self. One never arrives at the destination but has to continue along the journey, and everyone's will be different. We shouldn't dictate the A-B-Cs of family life. We need to give space for families to grow in their own ways.

This is why I would tell writers and politicians interested in families to proceed with great caution. Be extremely careful when saying things like "help families have more children not only in our national interest, but in families' personal interest." Politics doesn't change people's hearts. And changing people's hearts is the only way for them to be more open to families with more children. ■

Robin Taylor is a happily married Kentucky native with five successful, college-educated sons. She works as a cardiothoracic RN and loves to garden.

Making It Easier to Make Ends Meet

HANNAH KETCHAM

6 a.m. is much too early for this tired mama. But nonetheless, I hear that little pitter-patter of onesie-covered feet coming down the hall into our room. With a soft “Mom, can I have a banana?” my day begins, whether I’m ready for it or not. A few minutes later, my husband is out the door before the rest of us are finished eating breakfast so he can get a head start on one of his three jobs while we still have daylight.

I know our family is just like thousands of others who are doing everything they can to make ends meet and get food on the table for their little ones. We want to make sure our two little toddlers can eat healthy, organic food, ideally without breaking the bank, so we’ve started trying to raise our own food, and drive 30 minutes each way to the budget grocery store instead of the name-brand one in town. Everywhere we can, we try to be thrifty. We don’t go out to eat, we buy all of our clothes secondhand—heck, we even cut our own hair to save a little money.

But it still isn’t enough. We feel like we are drowning most days.

Why is that? Why is life so expensive? We make “too much” money to qualify us for food banks or government assistance, and yet where we currently are, in the “lower middle class,” doesn’t afford us much wiggle room to save money for our kids’ future, pay for child care, plan for retirement, etc.

We trim our budget down as much as we can, yet somehow still don’t have enough money to save up for

that replacement car that we know we'll need soon, or to buy plane tickets to visit our out-of-state family. And that's not to mention the strain of health care costs: no one should feel scared to take their child to the ER because they are worried they can't afford the bill before their deductible is met, yet that is reality for many.

Government assistance programs are in place for a reason and would be helpful if they were more accessible to families even just slightly above that magic number they established as the "poverty line." But really, I'd love to be able to help bring in some extra income, but can't afford to.

Isn't that a funny concept? Daycare (that would allow us both to be contributing to society by working) is too expensive. We have no family in the area, so daycare or babysitters are our only option and we can't afford it. So I stay at home, wishing desperately I could use the skills I went to school for to help provide for our family and give us a little more financial breathing room.

I don't have grand solutions to offer politicians or demands that they make changes for me and other families like ours. I know a lot of families have it worse than us, and yet the cost of living still seems unaffordable. A bigger child tax credit might help, but I just wish politicians would be aware of how hard it can be to keep our family healthy, clothed, housed, and fed, and take our struggles seriously.

Their constituents are working three jobs to put bread on the table for their families, and still feel like they're falling behind. Middle-class families shouldn't feel like they can't afford to make ends meet, and yet too many of us do. ■

***Hannah Ketcham** was born and raised in Nebraska, but now lives in rural Pennsylvania where she and her husband are raising their two small children.*

“Family Policy” Should Include Caring for Maternal Health

BIANCA LABRADOR

Lots of people have been talking about “family policy.” Let’s not forget that family policy starts with mothers.

More than half of new mothers experience the “baby blues,” but for some, it becomes even more serious. I know firsthand. In 2014, I had my first daughter. I managed to stay upbeat, though worn out from life with a newborn. As time went on, it got harder. I remember crying the morning my husband went back to work. How was I supposed to function after only an hour of sleep? Less than 23 months later, we welcomed our second daughter.

I’m not sure if it was the pressure of having two young babies, my hormones, or the stress of my job giving me only two weeks maternity leave that made the transition so difficult. Regardless, my mental health suffered. My husband’s paternity leave only allowed him two days at home. After that, it was me alone with the girls. I was up all night, breastfeeding around the clock, and then getting up with the two-year-old when my husband left for work. It felt like I was alone on an island. None of my family lived nearby, and I was never the kind of person to ask for help.

Around three months postpartum, my mood took a major shift. I remember driving over one of the many bridges in Pittsburgh while my girls screamed in the backseat. For a second, I had the thought—“I could just pull over right here and jump.” The tragic reality is that some moms have. When those thoughts became more vivid, I sought help. I’ve been in therapy for over four years, and I wouldn’t change it for the world.

I was never officially diagnosed with postpartum depression (PPD). But the fact is, I felt like and thought about killing myself. I'd panic when I thought of all the ways my baby could die, or all of the ways I could mess up. Even to this day, I think back to some of the mishaps and my chest gets tight. Like the time I fell asleep holding my littlest one at only four days old; I could have killed her!

When I hear of families losing their loved ones to PPD, I wonder how that death could have been avoided if our country had a better support system. During pregnancy, mothers are constantly going to the doctor for care. After delivery, that care drops, and the mental health evaluation is a black-and-white form on a cold clipboard asking her to evaluate herself six weeks later. I remember doing these evaluations. *Do you feel overwhelmed?* Aren't all new mothers? *Do you feel more sad than usual?* I don't know. If these questions are answered wrong, could my baby be taken away? Best to err on the side of caution: I am great. I feel wonderful. I love motherhood. There's nothing wrong.

Then, there's the pressure of the new baby visit. The pediatrician telling you that your baby lost weight, and you need to pump their weight back up. Am I a bad mother? Am I failing at breastfeeding?

Let's not forget about the pressures of the workforce. My job gave me two weeks off. They could have demanded that I returned immediately due to their number of employees, and if I had refused, they could have fired me. Sure, I could have tried to argue about ADA, but that would have meant facing a battle while recovering from childbirth. This story isn't unique. Facebook mother groups are full of women talking about their employers demanding they return after delivery.

If our lawmakers and health care system could take postpartum care seriously, both at work and in doctors' offices, there's a chance women could feel less pressure

and find more support. It should be illegal, regardless of company size, to demand a mother return to work before she’s even stopped bleeding. We should look into postpartum home visits for mother and baby by social workers and midwives, like they do in other countries, to help mothers feel less pressure and more support. When people talk about “family policy,” it should include maternal health policy, including pre- and post-natal care. After all, when a baby is born, the mother’s journey isn’t over; in some ways, it’s just beginning, and mothers in America deserve to be cared for. ■

***Bianca Labrador** is a wife and mother of three. When she's not busy vacuuming up Goldfish crumbs, she can be found reading, working on an art project, or playing World of Warcraft, where she fights for the Alliance.*

Enabling Families to Support Each Other

MECHELL ROACHE-JOHNSON

Although I know that some of my opinions are solid and will not be changed, I usually keep them to myself—and wish a lot of other people would as well sometimes. This is a personal topic to me, but since we just celebrated Pride month, it's important for me to be honest: I have a gay daughter. Yes, I am proud of her, I support and love her, and support other marginalized members of that community. We need politicians to help make sure families can take care of each other. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I had had inklings for a while—from her not wanting to wear skirts in elementary school to finding out she had seen every episode of “The L Word” as a teen. But when I first found out about my baby being gay, if I'm being honest? I blamed myself.

I was ashamed, worried about how my family would feel. I was embarrassed because I was privy to conversations where people in my family said some not-so-nice things about gay people. I was concerned for her physical and mental safety. I had seen the movie *Boys Don't Cry*. Now add to that the reality of being a black woman in America, and I was frazzled.

Especially amidst the pandemic, in fear of the unknown, I clung to my family. My daughter was supposed to graduate in the spring of 2020, but instead we spent the year dealing with lockdowns and trying to support her dreams. When life was crumbling in the midst of the virus, my views only strengthened: families need

to support each other, to love each other, no matter what, and politics should be able to help stabilize families facing crisis. I talked to my best friend, my sister, a therapist—finding that strength through their compassionate listening and encouragement, never judging me.

I am learning, learning to let go, learning to let her be free to be the woman she wants to be. So often, before you get pregnant, you dream these dreams of who your child will be, what they will look like and how we can fit them into our puzzle of life. For me, each day is a release of what I thought that life should be, and an embrace of what it is.

That means not enforcing my ways on her, besides being a good human, someone who contributes to society, who is kind and compassionate but also nobody's fool. Someone who is smart and as beautiful on the inside as she is on the outside. I am in awe of her strength and ability to live in her truth.

I am proud that she does not stand alone. She has her mom, grandma, aunt, dad, and multitudes of cousins and friends who are unwavering in their love and support of her. I choose to love my kids. Period, full stop. I choose to allow others to live their lives in the ways they see fit as long as it does not hurt anyone.

At the same time, it's frustrating to hear how many people want to impose their beliefs, judgments and morals as the only standard of living. And how many people don't care about protecting parents or kids. When you hear politicians or activist groups talk, they don't talk about making our lives better. In the pandemic, they didn't want to financially assist struggling families. The homeless, the elderly, our most vulnerable populations, were all at risk. The government failed the little people

but made sure to take care of the wealthy and big businesses.

That is not right. We need politicians to put families first and focus on taking care of us when hardship strikes, rather than taking care of those who are already doing just fine. Government should be about strengthening families to support each other. With so much chaos in our streets and change in society, we need to support parents and make sure that they can always choose to support their child, no matter what. Until we are all treated equally and fairly, we have failed as a society. We need to give people the chance to make mistakes, explore, and discover themselves. That is freedom, and that is what America is all about. ■

***MeChell Roache-Johnson** was born and raised in the south side of Chicago, and is a wife and mother of two. When she's not the voice of calm in the midst of chaos, she enjoys reading mystery thrillers and writing.*

COMMUNITY

33

**Do They Even Know
Who They Represent?**

ANGEL BERNARD

35

**Don't Talk to Us Like
We're Idiots**

GUY STICKNEY

37

**What I Wish Our
Politicians Knew**

SHEILA WILKINSON

40

**Social Security Was
Supposed to Be Secure**

NANCY MERICAL

42

**Does Anyone in Power Notice
When Government Services Fail?**

DOROTHY RAMSEY

Do They Even Know Who They Represent?

ANGEL BERNARD

It would be nice if politicians did their job and represented us. Half the time I don't even know if they know the first thing about the places they claim to represent, much less the people who live here. What is the point of having a democracy if nobody will listen to you?

Lawmakers worry more about controlling climate change and building border walls instead of caring about the neighborhoods of where real people live, where the real problems are. The people I know feel like their voice is not heard—on any level. Fighting for what's right is a lost cause. You just hope to get by.

Let me tell you a little bit about what I mean. First, as a recovering addict and previously incarcerated felon, it is difficult to find assistance specifically designed for loans for school. I cannot get my felony charges sealed without the money for the court fees—it's about three grand, and I'm barely making ends meet as it is. Those fees are never going to get paid.

If politicians cared, they'd make it so there could be some sort of reprieve for those who have changed their lives. I am six years sober, have a good job, taking classes, married, a mother, a grandmother, I even own my home—but I am still labeled a felon.

Secondly, there is no assistance for those in my income bracket. All the programs out there are designed for those at or below the federal poverty level, but what about those just above the line? What about those who do not qualify for food assistance or food pantries and

are simply struggling? If my car breaks down, I don't have the savings to fix it. I have to decide to whether to pay my gas bill or fix the car that gets me to work.

Little things make it difficult too. Lots of people don't have a grocery store nearby. How much easier would it be if there was a corner store in your neighborhood, instead of having to find a store ten or 15 miles away?

Even for those below the poverty line, the system doesn't run smoothly. My job as a case manager is to help others navigate the system, since there is no way a regular person will be able to decipher who to call or where to go for simple assistance. Little things can make such a difference, like if the social services operator feels like being rude and disrespectful to someone calling for aid. Nothing discourages someone faster than being treated like an inconvenience just for asking if something is available.

And what you need is usually unavailable, anyway. For example, there isn't enough subsidized housing in this area and yet the need is so great. The local housing authority in Montgomery County never has openings, but it will put you on a waiting list for years and years. What are people supposed to do in the meantime? I don't know, but it would be different if lawmakers saw our homeless community as neighbors who needed some assistance, not just "the homeless" to be ignored.

These aren't the big questions that get discussed in Washington. As far as I can tell, no one in any government office discusses them much of anywhere. We need the policymakers to come down to our level and hear the people. Get to know us a little. ■

***Angel Bernard** is a case manager supervisor at a homeless shelter in Dayton, Ohio. She holds a CDCA certification and hopes to one day earn a BS in social work.*

Don't Talk to Us Like We're Idiots

GUY STICKNEY

There's an easy way to tell when politicians think we're idiots. They have this way of dancing around the answer when they are asked a question, when even a simple "yes" or "no" would do the trick. But instead, they give us the song and dance and start distracting us by going into subjects that are completely off-topic. Is the economy good? Do masks work? Does our country need military bases all over the world? Hey, look over there—it's a shiny object.

And the media falls for it every time. Oh, sure, the reporters could ask better questions and keep the people informed so that we could make a change the next time an election rolls around. But no, they fall for the bait. And the American people end up distracted from the issues that really matter.

Think about all the mistakes we've made overseas that no one pays any attention to. Think about the last time you heard any politician take responsibility for his or her mistakes.

One prime example of this came during the Iraq War. President Bush made one key mistake when they caught Saddam Hussein: he fired the entire Iraqi army, which meant that all of a sudden there were thousands of trained men with weapons and without paychecks. And you think you can take over and set up a new government? That's where all the insurgents came from.

Yet how many empty promises did we hear over the years? And continue to hear? President Obama and President Biden want to pull us out of a Republican war in the Middle East, and for good reason. But the

insurgents have been biding their time for our departure, and when we pull out early, they'll think they've won. Maybe they have. After all, why are we leaving under cover of darkness? Is it because we lost and there are conditions? (Heck, if I was part of a group that kicked the a** of a superpower the likes of which the world has never known, I'd be wanting to impose some conditions on them, too.)

I can't help thinking about all the time and money and lives that were wasted in a part of the world where people have been fighting for as long as I can remember, and will continue to fight even after we leave. Yet did anyone ever tell us the truth? Or did we just hear about how "we have to fight them over there so we don't end up fighting them here"? Give me a break.

And the money keeps going to endless wars instead of feeding hungry families at home, all the while causing children overseas to grow up hating the U.S. Some of the children who grew up hating us are now the ones fighting us.

The least our leaders could do is be honest with us. One of my friends, a Ukrainian named Alex, told me he was with a woman here in the U.S., and in the middle of the night, he needed some booze. He drove to the store but they wouldn't sell it to him—it wasn't allowed. He said, "I didn't have the freedom to buy alcohol at three in the morning—this country is not free. But at least we have food!"

And I think we all feel that way sometimes. At least we have some things to be grateful for. But our elected politicians treat us like idiots who can't handle our own decisions or deserve to know the truth. Until that changes, America won't be free. ■

***Guy Stickney** is an artist and skateboarder who lives in western Washington. He has also written some short stories under the pen name **Goose Punk**.*

What I Wish Our Politicians Knew

SHEILA WILKINSON

The recent post by Guy Stickney got me thinking about why it's so hard for politicians to discuss things openly and honestly—and why we have a hard time doing it, too.

Politics never used to pique my interest—maybe because my parents endured World War II, and I experienced those tragic, tumultuous days of the Vietnam War. The nightly news described harrowing situations and heartbreaking circumstances across the world, and I wanted to avoid all memory of those events.

So what happened to turn me into a political junky? Probably money. When the inflation of the '70s hit, I realized that the government spent a huge amount of money on more services, more support, more improvements, more facilities, and more luxuries. More, more, more. Where did the money come from? What kind of legacy were we leaving to our grandchildren? What kind of lessons were we teaching them?

And yet whenever conversations turned to politics, it became impossible to discuss. We used to be able to have level-headed discussions about differences of opinion, but now family discussions about political matters would turn into door-slamming shouting matches. I love my family and never want to antagonize those relationships. So, I buried my opinions to avoid creating divisions in the family. Even casual conversations at the grocery store can turn prickly when politics comes up.

Why can't we discuss politics with each other anymore? Why can't we talk about important issues without arguments and derogatory comments? We see the protests in our streets, the riots, even the rise in murders. How can we fix this if we cannot talk openly about it? When just to mention certain facts is to open yourself to being called bigoted, backwards, or worse?

On a personal level, I certainly know my own attitude and demeanor are important, and I know I cannot control how others respond to me when they disagree. I can work on that. But our politicians could do a better job holding up their end of the bargain, too. When they inflame the passions that divide us, it might lead to a boost in the polls, but it leaves us feeling more and more frustrated with our friends, our neighbors, and even our own family members.

So, with that in mind, here are several ways that our elected leaders might help ease the painful discussions. So, a few words to whichever Mr. or Ms. Politician may be reading:

- **Please be truthful.** Nothing gives my opponent more ammunition than when they catch me repeating a lie. The truth, the whole, unedited truth, is what I need to speak with integrity. It's helpful to have information I can easily access and cite. But when you give me unfactual "facts," I am humiliated. I have no ground to stand on. Please tell it to me straight.
- **Be clear in your communications.** Don't try to hide your stances in weasel words. I need explanations on difficult issues so that I can understand the policies, bills, and statements that you support. If you have a good reason for not passing a piece of legislation that sounds good, sharing that in a clear manner empowers me to speak intelligently. Oftentimes, the most important part of understanding why you

oppose a seemingly popular piece of legislation is the unintended consequences.

- **Share your vision.** Please tell me what your vision is for our state or country—no platitudes. We must express a positive vision succinctly, so that all citizens can relate and understand how it benefits them. It’s not enough just to recite buzzwords: tell us what you think government is for, what it can do, and when it should get out of the way.
- **Act with compassion.** It’s okay to pat yourself on the back and tell us about the good things you are doing for us every once in a while. I want to share your acts of compassion in conversations with others who never hear about them. Focusing only on how much you want to fight the other side makes it difficult to defend ideals in good faith.

If you tell me the truth and share information, I’ll have a strong foundation to make my case—your case, our case. I’m willing to speak up for truth and constructive ideas with my family and friends, and you can help me do so fearlessly, honestly, and compassionately.

I’m not saying these steps will end polarization as we know it. But it will equip those of us who want to engage passionately and respectfully to do so. And it may make our politics a little more appealing and productive. ■

Sheila Wilkinson lives in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where she is the current president of the Western Wisconsin Christian Writers Guild. She is the author of Frankie San: A Burning and Shining Light for Christ.

Social Security Was Supposed to Be Secure

NANCY MERICAL

Politicians today are out of step with the many elderly—like me—who live on Social Security alone. They propose spending tax dollars on cancelling student loans or health care for illegal immigrants or other proposals that aren't really “needs.” Meanwhile, this money comes out of the pockets of hardworking Americans, many of whom may depend on the monthly disbursements after retirement as their only source of income.

I thought Social Security was supposed to be secure. But we often are warned that the dollars allocated for this purpose are running out. Why are politicians so eager to spend money on everything but maintaining this contract?

As a widow whose husband worked from the age of eighteen to the early retirement age of 62, I find it hard to swallow the fact that his contributions over those years may be endangered. Whether due to the funds being used for purposes other than what they were intended for, or politicians preferring to spend money they don't have on things we don't need, it feels like we're being robbed.

This is personal for me. I turned down a college scholarship when my husband insisted I be a stay-at-home mom, so I didn't contribute much to Social Security. But I worked harder at occasional odd jobs and crafting in order to raise our four children than did mothers employed by banks or other well-paying institutions, even if I got paid less.

By the time my husband died last year at the age of 84, his poor investment choices had depleted all of

our funds intended for retirement—other than Social Security. My excellent mathematical skills, along with frugality, had previously allowed us to live on those disbursements. But after he was diagnosed with cancer and passed (leaving me a widow at almost 80 years old), I found myself trying to make ends meet and avoid poverty on the meager sum of \$1,488 per month.

My expenses didn't drop much: fewer groceries to buy, I guess, and less spent on specialists. But others rose alarmingly, starting with my husband's funeral expenses and final medical bills, then hiring people to perform the maintenance work I could not accomplish, followed by higher costs for car insurance and utilities, and all on that same fixed amount every month.

And now I hear my government wants to pay out more to illegal immigrants who have never paid a dime in taxes than to the widow of a man who paid thousands of dollars in taxes over the years. This saddens and angers me. Where is the loyalty to Americans who worked hard for decades? When did a government "for the people" begin to forget its promises to Americans and become so obsessed with spending money on people who haven't paid into the system?

I've had my share of hard times and have had to resort to robbing Peter to pay Paul many times. But when my elected officials talk about robbing the taxes paid by hardworking Americans to benefit non-American or non-contributing people, it's time to take a step back. Before we start taking on trillions of dollars in new spending for whatever new program happens to sound good, let's make sure we can make good on the promises that have already been made. ■

Nancy Merical lives in Jackson County, West Virginia, where she taught piano for many years. She enjoys creating greeting cards, framed prints, and painted rocks, which she sells at various fairs across the state.

Does Anyone in Power Notice When Government Services Fail?

DOROTHY RAMSEY

Take a deep breath and hold it for ten seconds. Imagine doing that over and over again, 31,536,000 times, not knowing where your children were. That's ten years—or as long as my daughter was separated from her two disabled sons after their non-custodial father abducted them. But when she went to the police, they barely provided the basic due diligence. It was the first time the government would fail her. It would not be the last.

Eventually, ten years of ungiven Christmas and birthday presents took up room in my closet before my daughter found her sons. But even then, the state agency was slow to allow her to contact them. The state workers' evaluations were short and perfunctory. Without going into all of the details, the whole story was just one government services failure after another.

By the time my daughter reunited with her sons, she had completed her college degree with \$62,000 of student loans and a near straight-A average, yet could not find a job in her chosen field—social work. Today, her sons receive SSDI checks to help them get by, but there are no day programs for people with their abilities, or programs to keep them occupied or contributing to society while their mom is working. Trust me, with a degree in social work, my daughter would know how to look for the support systems. They just aren't there.

So the state of Texas has created a situation in which a social worker with a degree and \$62,000 of school loan debt can't find a job in the field she was trained in, while her disabled sons can't find the services they need, and have no real path towards being moderately independent. Something just doesn't add up.

Part of the reason is because funding for social services for the disabled, particularly the mentally disabled, is abysmal. Would politicians notice how insufficient these funds are if it were their own relatives who were being failed?

When politicians and bureaucrats pass laws while knowing nothing about the people they impact, they create these impossible situations. If more politicians knew more people with disabilities, or families who have been repeatedly failed by government agencies, they might spend more resources on independent living programs or making systems work better.

How many parents are unable to figure out the bureaucracy because of the government workers' apathy or a lack of resources? I wish I knew why the state of Texas refuses to fund services with miles-long waiting lists. Do you need to find a group home for disabled adults? Good luck; you'll apply and be something like 57,304th in line for placement in an adult care facility.

I can't help but think that with what the government spent to have Secret Service protection on the golf courses the last four years, we could have built more than several group home treatment centers. If we spent less on bombs and weapons, we might have more money left over to invest in qualified social workers needing a job. Surely my grandsons need some sort of independent living training and vocational training programs more than we need to learn if there is microbial life on Mars.

My daughter is doing the best she can, but she is physically, emotionally, and financially exhausted. I do my best to send money to help cover medical expenses, but there are always more bills to pay. Currently, she's battling cancer while looking for a second job, and I'm doing part-time work, but I'm a 72-year-old widow living on Social Security with a fast-shrinking 401(k). Her story breaks my heart, but what makes it worse is knowing how many other parents and grandparents may be in similar situations.

I know there will never be a perfect system, but I wish there were a way to ensure people who are literally working themselves to death get some relief and people in need of social services actually get served. Am I supposed to think it's good news that if she passes away, the calculation that the state uses to assess the boys' needs will move them up because they no longer have an alternative care provider? My heart aches for them every single day, and I have no idea how to help other than send them withdrawals from my 401(k).

I don't mind paying taxes at all. It's part of how we fund a society, support our democracy, and pay our political leaders. I just wish they would lead. ■

Dorothy Ramsey retired to Lincoln, Nebraska, after a career working in HR, where she volunteers at her church, is a part-time bookkeeper for an arts theater, and lives with her Lynx-point Siamese named Smokie Girl.

WORK

47

**COVID's Toll on the
American Dream**

RUBY NICOLE DAY

50

**How Essential Are the
'Email Job' Caste?**

GORD MAGILL

53

**A Dream Achieved—Through
Mere Luck?**

PETER MARTUNEAC

56

**Our Policies Are Failing
Working Mothers**

KELLY NICOLE

59

**When Work Doesn't
Seem to Pay**

SASHA BURNS

COVID's Toll on the American Dream

RUBY NICOLE DAY

The American Dream—people have hung on to those three little words for decades, passed them down for generations. But it's hard to see how we can believe in the dream right now.

To me, the American Dream is having a well-paying job, having good health insurance, earning benefits for your family, and being a meaningful member of society. Americans want to get up and go to work knowing you earned your way and not depending on others to hand it to you.

Before COVID-19, I was living that dream. I loved my job at a construction, fabrication, and service company, installing pipes and fittings across Ohio and Kentucky.

But the pandemic changed so much. It feels like the American Dream has been shattered. Those of us still working every day were forced to continue our normal routine at our same normal pay. We risked everything daily, and we risked bringing the virus home to our families every day. Daycares began to close, schools began to close, and those of us still working had nowhere for our children to go while we were still expected to be at work daily. We were forced to use vacation days, PTO days, and unpaid time off if we did not have child care or if someone in our household was ill. It does not seem that our lawmakers have taken account of the stress and pressure they put on people who have continued to work during all of this.

Meanwhile, if you lost your job, lawmakers decided to provide unemployment benefits at an alarming rate

of pay. So many people manipulated the system to get benefits that others should be receiving. In Ohio alone there has been \$330 million paid out in fraudulent benefits; across the U.S., that number is over \$36 billion.

It feels like there is no reason for us essential workers to continue pushing on daily. Our lawmakers have given us every reason to leave our jobs and file for unemployment. It would be easier to stay home than to face the challenge of starting over in a world ravaged by a deadly virus. Not having insurance during this time and having no income is completely devastating for a family who has worked so hard to become an example of the American Dream. I know this all too well.

After I contracted COVID-19 and developed medical complications, I had to walk away from my job, losing my insurance as well as my income. My medical bills are in the thousands of dollars, but I don't qualify for unemployment since I voluntarily left my position. Our lives have been completely changed over the last two months for the worse.

It feels like lawmakers have made no effort to help us at all. They have given us basically nothing, no hope for the future. Instead of the extra checks for the unemployed, they should have sent us essential workers that extra income. They should have made sure we were taken care of as we kept the economy running and continued to risk our lives and our families' lives daily. Lawmakers in Washington seem to have no clue how this pandemic negatively impacted so many families.

I have always wanted to be a shining light to everyone about how the American Dream is achievable no matter who you are. But this pandemic has destroyed a lot of faith and a lot of trust that people had in the government. I loved my job and hopefully someday I will be able to return, but I feel like it will take years

before we can even begin to get back to chasing what we have all been taught is the amazing and incredible American Dream. ■

***Ruby Nicole Day** was raised and currently lives in South Lebanon, Ohio. She is the proud mother of a wonderful 12-year-old son.*

How Essential Are the 'Email Job' Caste?

GORD MAGILL

Despite the impact of “Stupid-19,” life rolls on in a very essential fashion for myself and many other workers. In my case, I work in energy distribution, and here in the cold northeast, the “propane must flow” if homes were to be kept warm this past winter, and some level of comfort is to be maintained for those stuck inside from sickness or unemployment.

Many of those “stuck inside,” however, are part of a particular caste that a favored podcaster of mine likes to call those with “e-mail jobs.” Many of them work for various levels of government or as middle managers within every corporation in America. Many, if not most, of these people will never have to work 75 hours a week, drive and/or grind it out in terrible weather conditions, and then get home too late to put their children to bed.

Seventy-five hours a week? No, I’m not making this up. Many people working in essential services such as utilities maintenance or trucking regularly put in this kind of time. Thanks to the “COVID Emergency,” many trucking operations have been granted Hours-Of-Service waivers which allow their drivers to exceed legislated maximum working hours. Sometimes this might be necessary; often it is not. But you’ll never catch the “e-mail job” caste pulling 75-hour weeks. In fact, they often use tools such as these waivers to cover for their own incompetence and disorganization. As a colleague of mine quipped, “If we can’t get it done today, just blame COVID.”

Well, I’m tired of “blaming COVID” and letting this caste of people off the hook. Everyone knows about

billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, and the many deleterious effects their influence has on society. Very little, however, is mentioned (again, save by some podcast hosts) about the more insidious and distributed effects of an entire class of managers who have very real and direct power over the lives of workers.

As others have noted, we don't have a battle between the 1% and 99%—it's more like a battle between the 20% and the 80%. Many within that 20% are what author Barbara Ehrenreich describes as the “Professional Managerial Class”: managers and human resources drones who spend much of their time in meetings that produce nothing but policies which paternalize workers and produce no material benefits for us. It is this portion of the 20% that needs their power reckoned with and reigned in.

Those HR and other middle management types make “busy work” for themselves, though it is darkly ironic that the “busyness” in which they are engaged often results in making my work more difficult and time-consuming. Not to mention that their salaries, which they justify through the busy work, leave less behind for those of us who are actually “doing the work.”

Long before COVID lockdown overreactions were imposed upon us, the more libertarian-minded were already well aware of this dynamic, given our innate skepticism of regulation and observations of reality. Those of us subject to OSHA or the DOT or any number of “Health and Safety” managers have had to work around being treated like children or criminals as a matter of course.

In fact, one of the bright spots of COVID, at least for me, has been a reduction of in-person interactions with many of these management types. My company office hasn't had a safety meeting in over a year, and I haven't seen an area manager nor middle manager

in the same time. And guess what? The work—the real work—still got done, and despite everything going on, our customers remained warm.

If we are going to have a collective discussion about “the working class,” it might be time to consider keeping these managers and enforcers away from us on a more permanent basis, given that they produce little of value and do not improve our lives in any way. In an economy made increasingly zero-sum by forces beyond our control, those in the “e-mail job” caste are literally taking money out of a pie which would be more deservedly enjoyed by the families who do the *actual* work. ■

***Gord Magill** is a legal immigrant to America who has spent 25 years trucking in 4 countries, and was booted from Twitter a month before President Trump, ostensibly for exposing corporate welfarism in the trucking industry.*

A Dream Achieved— Through Mere Luck

PETER MARTUNEAC

Improvise, adapt, and overcome. The instructors at Marine Corps Recruit Training drilled those three words into the heads of my friends and myself back in 2010. It's a pretty linear concept on a battlefield. But what do you do when asked to apply this to chasing the American Dream?

It's ironic—that dream we're all chasing, the idea that America affords everyone the freedom to succeed on their own terms? It's not really something you can chase while in the military. When you're in the service, the military takes away the necessary components of freedom; you are quite literally the property of the American government.

But we were a patriotic bunch, my platoon, so we didn't really mind having our lives dictated to us. The "Dream" could wait. Besides, long-term planning didn't make much sense to 19- and 20-year-olds who stood a real chance of dying before they were old enough to drink. We could improvise when the time came.

But after I separated from the military, no amount of improvisation could help me adapt. I ended up going to college, but always felt like an intruder, someone who never quite fit in.

For one thing, my classmates largely struggled with the impending burden of repaying their student loans, but I had no such concerns. I pulled triggers for Uncle Sam for four years in wars of questionable intent, and in return the government paid my tuition bills. Even if I never hit a high-paying job, I wouldn't have to worry

about escaping tens of thousands of dollars' worth of student debt.

But even without that debt, I soon learned that it's a hard world out there, even for college grads, and I had a new family to support. I worked the night shift on a factory floor for a couple years. It was a good job in a small town, and that classic American setting may have been enough to fulfill a "Dream" in years gone by.

But times had changed. The rising specter of climate change, and government action to combat it, threatened these traditional jobs, and people there felt like the new American Dream was being built atop the grave of their livelihoods. It was hard to see a long-term future for myself down there.

Eventually, my college degree finally landed me a better job, one that I really enjoy and that comes with significant benefits. I've reached now what I think is the American Dream, or at least some folks might call it that. The problem is that I don't feel like I did anything to earn it.

It's easy for some people to say we need to do more for our veterans; the best way to support returning war veterans is to stop creating war veterans in the first place. I survived a war in one piece when many of my brothers came back either missing limbs or inside flag-draped coffins. I survived not because I was braver or stronger than they were, but thanks to the dumb luck of not falling within a marksman's crosshairs when he ambushed my squad in an open field. The luck of not stepping three inches to the right of a certain dirt path and detonating the bomb hidden there. Mere luck saw me through the war, and I wouldn't be here now without it.

The lesson learned from my life thus far seems to be that the American Dream is within reach if only you'll fight in Uncle Sam's wars, and even then, you better be one of the lucky ones to survive unscathed, both physically and mentally. Being lucky enough to survive, keep all my limbs, and not sink into crippling depression was the first and most important step on the path that led to college and eventually to my current place. I was one of the "lucky ones," even though many thousands just like me were not.

My American Dream feels stolen, like I purchased it with the blood of brothers and enemies. I keep thinking, what other lesson should I have learned? Is "hope you're the lucky one" the only way to adapt and overcome life's challenges? Is this really the American Dream we were meant to have? ■

***Peter Martuneac** is a husband, father, and former United States Marine living in Indiana. In his spare time, he writes books as a self-published author.*

Our Policies Are Failing Working Mothers

KELLY NICOLE

When I was in my 20s, I was confident I'd be a stay-at-home parent if I had children—I simply didn't give the alternatives much thought. But sometimes life goes in different ways than you expect.

I got married in November 2019 at age 33. Three months later, in February 2020, we had a surprise positive pregnancy test. It was quicker than we had expected, and, of course, the world shut down just a few weeks later. In addition to all the usual concerns of first-time parents, we had the added stress of a pandemic whose effects were largely unknown at that time. Spring 2020 was a roller coaster of stress, dreams, doctor visits, and crushing isolation.

While all of that was going on, and the due date drew closer, I was the primary breadwinner in our family. I felt that I'd worked very hard to get to where I was, and that quitting my job outright in seven months would leave our family in a financially unstable position.

Although I still struggled with the notion of leaving my infant with a near-stranger 40–50 hours per week, my manager asked for a definitive answer to the question of if I was “coming back” after childbirth. I felt compelled to say yes. I felt that my only option was giving the working-mom routine a try, at least for a few months.

I worked in a male-dominated industry, in a company with around 150 employees across three states. It had been 30 years since a current full-time employee had had a child, which meant there simply wasn't much

of a company precedent when it came to maternity leave. The best my company's HR staff could offer was a combination of FMLA leave (up to 12 weeks) and short-term disability pay. I immediately knew I'd max out the FMLA time—even 12 weeks seemed too short a time to bond with my newborn daughter. Short-term disability would cover only 60% of my base pay, and there was other, dismaying fine print that I didn't discover until later—it did not pay out anything the entire first week of leave, for instance.

When it came time to deliver the baby, I had an unexpected C-section. The short-term disability pay ended at eight weeks, so I had to use all of my remaining paid time off to cover the last four weeks (and still, that only partially covered it). That meant no vacation time left for 2021.

After a couple of months of full-time work, paired with the costs of in-home child care (I couldn't stomach the thought of my baby at a traditional daycare center), I decided the routine was simply not sustainable. My mental health took a major hit after the sudden transition back to full-time work, and I missed the physical reality of being with my baby. After factoring in how the high cost of child care was eating into my income, I decided a full-time job simply wasn't worth it. Fortunately my company allowed me to scale back to part-time work, and so far, we are able to just about get by, even with my major pay cut.

All in all, welcoming our child, a joyous event for any family, also meant a substantial financial hit to our family, even before considering our sizeable out-of-pocket hospital bills. Having a second child anytime in the next five years seems ludicrous. We would love to have more, but we won't be able to afford another financial setback anytime soon.

Many challenges that families face after the birth of child—the expense of child care, going into debt, lack of family support, social isolation, among many others—cause many talented women to feel that they have no choice but to drop out of the workforce as soon as they start families, often at the heights of their careers. Better maternity leave policies, like those in other countries, could give women like me the flexibility we need to juggle the roles of worker and mom. I love being a mother more than anything—I just wish there were better options to make it more achievable for working women who dream of having their own babies someday. ■

Kelly Nicole lives and works in Missouri and loves curling up with her nine-month-old daughter and a good book.

When Work Doesn't Seem to Pay

SASHA BURNS

Every day is a struggle when you're living in poverty. You never know when you might lose your next meal or a place to live. You never know if something unexpected will come around the corner and knock you down, and how you'd find the strength to get back up again.

I never had an easy life, going through difficult family problems, feeling discriminated against, facing abusive situations, and just struggling to get by. When you're just barely living paycheck to paycheck, you don't have time to worry about the big picture. You're just trying to hang on, put all that's going on in your life to the side so you can work a few more hours a week—if you can find a stable job. Every day is a struggle. Your dreams are crushed. You get tired, burnt out, depressed. Not everybody makes it through.

Politicians don't realize that while they're out there asking for big checks from their rich donors, or getting hyped up about the next big thing that is going to fix all your problems, life goes on for the rest of us. They're out there pushing for votes every four years and forget about us the rest of the time—the rest of us who don't care which suit gets elected because we know we'll be scraping together what we can just to get by. We're the ones living in the daily reality of trying to pay the bills with jobs that don't pay well, unable to enjoy time with family because it's so hard just to put food on the table, dealing with crime in our streets or drugs in our communities.

I'm almost 30 and don't have any kids. If I ever do, I want them to have a brighter future than so many of

the people I know in poverty. I knew I had to work my way through the struggle, not stop believing in myself, continuing to dream and want more. I went back to school to get a better job, because after all, that's what you're supposed to do, isn't it?

But in my case, all it led to was more debt, classes that didn't do me any good, and steps backwards instead of forward. Sometimes it doesn't feel worth the effort to try to better yourself, when you're unable to see a path forward out of the daily struggles of life. What's the point of working harder if you're just going to end up the same, or even worse off?

For me, I chose to change who I was, to better my thinking and my surroundings. It's been hard. But I feel like things are looking up for me now. Every day, to me, is a blessing from God.

If you talk to anyone in poverty, you'll probably hear a story like mine. We aren't afraid to work hard, we just want to know there's a reward at the end of the journey. Some of us make it through the darkest of days and come out stronger. But many more are still stuck there, waiting for some help. ■

***Sasha Burns** has spent her whole life in Anson County, North Carolina, where she works as a retail manager. Her favorite color is pink, and she loves poetry.*

A QUIET DESTRUCTION

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

In 1980, I returned from graduate school to help out on our family fruit farm that my great-great-grandmother had homesteaded in 1870. So many generations later, our rural avenue south of Fresno, California, was still dotted with farmhouses on 40, 80, 120, or 180 acres. She would have recognized the community as the same one in which she had lived.

The sociology and economy of the region remained agrarian. Families lived on the land where they farmed deciduous tree-fruit, grapes, and nut crops. School was delayed in the fall, so that farm kids could help their parents finish the raisin harvest or make enough money for school supplies and clothing by working for others. Multiethnic and multiracial families of Armenian-, Dutch-German-, Japanese-, Mexican-, Portuguese-, Punjabi-, and Scandinavian-descent—in other words, a natural rather than government-enforced diversity—had established a strong middle class, a century in the making. Commodity prices for fresh and dried fruit, and nuts, were more or less stable and sustainable, both from domestic and occasional export sales.

Neighboring rural communities enjoyed what we might prosaically call middle-class “culture”—sustainable small district hospitals, affordable homes, PTAs, Little Leagues, Lions, Kiwanis, and Rotary Clubs, and mom-and-pop downtown stores. Crime was nonexistent. There were few rich or poor—not by design, but because agriculture masked poverty and offered a life raft for the less successful—families could raise their own food (growing up we had chickens; canned and dried fruits and vegetables; and winter stocks of

walnuts, pecans, bottled and canned preserves, and raisins). “The rich” usually meant a few of the more entrepreneurial families who vertically integrated and expanded into packing, processing, trucking, and sales, but who in terms of lifestyle and appearance were nearly indistinguishable from their client farm producers.

Many farmers of my youth were World War II and Korean War veterans. A few of their children went away to college; many served in the military and fought in Vietnam. Our local community, like most in Fresno County, was polis-like, a true face-to-face society of about 6,000 citizens, who would, over a lifetime, recognize nearly all whom they met in town.



I think it fair to say that the lives of these rural communities and their shared ethos were a vital component of the Founders’ visions of a constitutional republic, predicated upon an independent and autonomous citizenry.

It would not have been desirable, or even possible, to replicate this model for the nation at large. But thousands of like communities throughout the country at least provided counterweights to, and cautionary voices on, the growing urbanization and suburbanization of the United States. I think it fair to say that the lives of these rural communities and their shared ethos were a vital component of the Founders’ visions of a constitutional republic, predicated upon an independent and autonomous citizenry.

I still live on my great-great-grandmother’s farm, but the surrounding community has been demolished by

cosmic forces of a sort I could not have imagined when I first returned home. A few corporations presently own or lease *all* the surrounding land, which they mostly plant in huge blocks of mono-cropped almonds for export. Most who farmed in the last century have died or moved away. Their children have either leased or more often sold their inheritances. Few if any live where they farm, and the local community has become Medieval with a few agribusiness wealthy and an underclass of recent immigrants, legal and illegal.

In the 1990s, California's Central Valley became ground zero for America's illegal immigration crisis. No longer did the dispossessed from Mexico arrive legally, in measured numbers, with some English, and prepared for rapid melting-pot assimilation, integration, and intermarriage. Farmhouses of my youth became the nexus of shacks for the undocumented. Today our rural avenue is plagued by gang warfare, drug labs, illegal cock- and dog-fighting, and absolute indifference to zoning laws. I know none of the names of dozens of families who live in houses and various sheds, lean-tos, and trailers around them within our half-mile vicinity.

In many places, building inspections, mosquito abatement, dog licensing, and vaccine audits—the stuff of civilization that became normative in the 1950s—have disappeared, as California has become both the most and least regulated state in the Union. Taxes, and gas and energy prices, have soared; yet services in some areas have disappeared, with our roads, bridges, and airports among the poorest in the nation. It is dangerous to walk through our farm at night. As one of my neighbors, a vestigial reminder of a lost world, put it—we are now supposedly a kinder, fairer nation on television, but right outside our doors a far more brutal one, too.

* * *

The concerns about a declining quality of American life in this collection of essays echo my own and share a common theme of growing inequality—especially the stagnation and diminution of the proverbial middle class. Of course, the country at large is far wealthier and more leisured than it was in 1980, but perhaps also more unhappy.

There are plenty of data to substantiate such discontent. Incomes have been stagnating for decades for broad swaths of the population, alongside extraordinary gains in wealth for a narrow elite. Almost half of all Americans now die with little if any net worth. Homeownership is in decline. Credit card debt and overall incumbrances are rising. Younger generations owe an aggregate \$1.7 trillion in college debt. The average age at marriage, childbearing, and first home ownership continues ticking higher. The U.S. fertility rate has fallen below 1.8 births per woman, insufficient to maintain the population at current levels.

Consistent concerns give way to what can at first seem paradoxical frustrations about government. Federal, state, and local services are faulted as either predictably incompetent, too intrusive, and overly costly, or, contradictorily, insufficient, absent, and poorly funded. And those not living below the federal poverty level seem to benefit from neither the empathy accorded the poor nor the taste and clout of the affluent.

But there is no paradox here. The problem is not that government is doing too much or too little, but rather that it is utterly failing in those key tasks that must rightfully be its focus. For instance, in the Central Valley, the abstract culprit was “globalization”: disadvantageous trade with the European Union, the outsourcing of commodity production to Mexico and Latin America, floods of illegal immigration, and a rejection of the old melting pot creed of assimilation and integration.

Until the acrimonious 2016 campaign, bipartisan orthodoxy championed “free” rather than fair trade. Policymakers cared little about the unfairness of systematic Chinese dumping, patent and copyright infringement, currency manipulation, and technology appropriation.



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When our commodity prices plunged due to European Union subsidies, imports from Mexico and Latin America, and monopolistic control of the retail food market by just a few huge chains (\$1,400-per-ton raisins in 1982 dropped to \$440 per ton a year later, while the price of a 28-pound box of plums crashed from \$14 to \$3), we were left with the usual government platitudes of “creative destruction.” Lower prices made us more “competitive,” and the “inefficient” were “weeded” out—all in a sense true, but blind to the cultural, social, and civilizational costs to American society at large.

The tale of woe of a few thousands family farmers in Central California was just a small microcosm of the radical transformations that redefined America in the late 20th century. Policymakers and Chamber of Commerce lobbyists told Americans that, in the case of China, such asymmetrical commercialism would eventually liberalize Beijing through mounting affluence, or at least force U.S. companies to become more productive while guaranteeing cheaper consumer prices at the local Wal-Mart. In contrast, demanding

reciprocal trade was branded as racism, xenophobic protectionism, futile, or contrary to free-market enterprise.

Not all globalization was pernicious. It brought lifesaving pharmaceuticals and Westernized products to the poorest on the planet. But in America it proved wildly imbalanced. Our two coasts, with their windows East to the European Union and West to Asia, became prosperous as never before. Those with unique skills that could not be so easily outsourced or offshored—in academia, entertainment, finance, government, insurance, investment, law, media—benefited from access to a global market of 7 billion consumers rather than a mere 300 million Americans. Wall Street, Silicon Valley, the Washington-New York government and financial corridor, and elite universities achieved staggering levels of influence and affluence.

Yet, those who relied on muscular labor or owned small businesses that were not vertically integrated discovered that what they made, grew, or sold could be done more cheaply abroad, or at least they were told that. Those who served or fabricated with their arms and backs saw little economic progress or upward mobility.

To defend, or at least obscure, this disaster, analysts inverted the cause and effect of middle-class economic decline. The epidemic of suicides, substance abuse, poor health, and fragmented families in the nation's interior was treated as spontaneously pathological. It was as if workers in the 1980s and 1990s suddenly lost their ethos and values and thus drove their jobs overseas, rather than experiencing the shock of multi-generational well-paid employment vanishing. A politicized vocabulary of elite disparagement—clingers, deplorables, irredeemables, scum, dregs, and chumps—arose to castigate them and their politics.

Government likewise has utterly failed to secure our borders, abandoning the fundamental idea of a unique place and sovereign domain so necessary for a nation-state. Over two million foreign nationals are scheduled to cross the southern border illegally this year, often with impunity. Many come without English, a high-school diploma, or much diversity. Almost none arrive with background checks, or with COVID-19 vaccinations in the midst of a pandemic. We the host know that assimilation, integration, and intermarriage occur best when immigration is diverse, meritocratic, measured—and legal. But we lack the will to impose such conditions.

There is a common mentality evident in these pathologies and among those policymakers responsible for them. It is a strange new sense of justified entitlement among our credentialed elites in government and in private enterprise. As self-righteous moralists, they now assume that their deserved affluence, influence, and cultural superiority should exempt them from suffering firsthand the consequences of their own abstract theories and misbegotten policies that fall so heavily and so destructively upon distant and forgotten others. ■

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CONCLUSION

PATRICK T. BROWN

In D.C. circles, you often hear pundits and organizers talk about the difference between an actual “grassroots” movement and its evil cousin, “astroturf,” a manufactured facsimile to advance a top-down agenda. Halfway between artifice and authenticity, you might come across the “bonsai trees,” those prized specimens painstakingly manicured to give just the right effect. At a hearing or lunchtime panel, you might hear from a low-income mom who benefitted from a tax credit program being pushed by an advocacy organization, or a farmer whose daily concerns are shoehorned into a discussion about agriculture subsidies.

To be sure, these are real people with stories that intersect with various facets of public policy. But when working-class Americans are heard in policy circles, they too often tend to be props flown in for a hearing, carefully positioned next to the podium at a rally, or quoted in soundbites served up by an interest group with an axe to grind. Their own perspectives are sanitized and pre-packaged, not taken as what they are—messy, at times contradictory, but more than just a stand-in for a pre-existing agenda.

As the editor of the Edgerton Essays project, published by American Compass in partnership with the Ethics and Public Policy Center, I naively thought our project would be a fairly simple one. First, find working-class Americans, typically without a four-year college degree, who felt distant from the political discourse and eager to share their thoughts. Second, give them a simple prompt, typically an open-ended invitation to tell politicians what they didn’t understand about

the challenges facing their communities. Third, work with them to hone their contribution in terms of organization and clarity while preserving their voices and perspective—no editing for party line or area of emphasis. Fourth, publish them, promote their work, and pay them as we would any other contributing writer.

The first step proved the hardest. The loss of social capital and dissolution of civic institutions that have especially plagued pockets of working-class America left distressingly few opportunities for reliable outreach. The same social facts that leave working-class communities vulnerable—unpredictable work schedules, declining church attendance, less community involvement—also mean a paucity of union leaders, pastors, fraternal organizations, or local newspapers to pass the word along.

Even when we found writers, more than a few felt they couldn't follow through. In our polarized age, people were uncomfortable sharing their honest opinions about work and welfare, family and community, for fear of losing friends or alienating employers. The essayists who published with us did so without a pseudonym or anonymity, and while it shouldn't have to take an act of bravery to share thoughts publicly, for many it was, and we're grateful.

These essays captured the unfiltered thoughts of working-class Americans in all their complicated diversity. We heard from former felons, grandmothers, nurses, veterans, and farmers. We heard calls for more money for child care assistance and more support for stay-at-home moms, for policymakers to give families more support and for them to get out of the way, for less regulation and more mandates, for more safety-net spending and less social spending that threatens

entitlements. We heard evidence to suggest that a working-class agenda should focus on pocketbook issues and essays that stressed a robust cultural push.



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Most strikingly, and in contrast to the pre-packaged “voices” typical in political media, almost none of our essayists spoke in terms of “policy principles.” With apologies to the 1970s feminists, in these essays the personal doesn’t feel political. The issues that get cable news play and attract fundraising dollars feel almost wholly distinct from the day-to-day reality of trying to pay the rent or get mental health assistance. Ideological fights over climate change and border walls left authors wondering when politicians would focus on making it easier for them to make ends meet. They thought in terms of “politicians,” not “policymakers,” and most often just wanted a government that simply works and pays attention to their concerns.

“Feeling heard” is an admittedly nebulous concept. Appeals to cultural affinity are obviously a shorthand way to try to create this bond. But the demand here tended to be that representatives spend more time “getting to know us a little,” as one writer put it, and less time on the rubber chicken circuit. Chambers of Commerce and identitarian activists are good at creating breakfast roundtables or town hall meetings to showcase a certain set of voters (or donors). Political leaders, researchers, and commentators will all need to work harder if they want to understand the

daily concerns of politically disconnected voters in the middle of the income distribution and develop an agenda that speaks to them.

I will be the first to admit that such an agenda will not earn headlines, clicks, or retweets. It may not even win a primary. But for a “populist” agenda to be more than a noisy veneer on pre-existing preferences, partisans of the right and left need to recognize the distance between their favored narratives and the ones that keep working-class Americans up at night. A candidate who focused on making health care less administratively burdensome, the schools a little more responsive, or rental assistance a little easier to navigate, might give some of our essayists, at least, a sense that someone is actually listening. ■

Patrick T. Brown is the editor of the Edgerton Essays and a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

