

America is squandering our grandchildren's future

By James D. Nowlan

Many of us sense our great nation—that City upon a Hill—is slipping down the slope, yet we're not sure how to restrain the slide.

Our democratic process is wonderful, yet not perfect. For example, frequent elections—combined with candidates who think the fate of the Western World rides on their personal re-election—induce politicians to focus laser-like on short-term gratification, their own and that of the voters. There is no political benefit, indeed there are costs, in thinking about the world our grandchildren will inherit.

Our political campaigns are rife with claims of leadership qualities, yet elected officials are really followers, not leaders, as maybe should be in a democracy. Candidates pore over opinion polls to learn what they can talk about to curry voter favor, and what they must avoid.

The really tough, fundamental issues are rarely on America's radar screen, among them the following:

- Social Security and Medicare. In a few years, both will run out of the money to pay full claims. Modest tweaking of the taxes and benefits could assure a future for both.
- Debt. The recent federal tax cut for you and me is paid for almost dollar for dollar with \$1½ trillion in debt, piled atop many other trillions.

- K-12 education. We talk about this endlessly, yet we ignore the imperative to lengthen the school day and year, and replace the long summer break with several shorter breaks throughout the year—as in other developed nations and China.
- Higher education. According to the College Board, per student spending by state and local governments declined by 15 percent in real terms between 2000 and 2017, while student debt soared.
- Health care. Expenditures have increased from 1/20th of GDP in 1960 to near 1/5th of a much larger real GDP today. Our governments have shifted spending from seed corn functions like higher education to meet health care costs, which are disproportionately claimed by old codgers like me. We are robbing young Peter to pay old Paul.
- Health. We couldn't have fought World War II with today's young, of whom fewer than 3 in 10 can meet armed services standards, according to Pentagon data reported in the Wall Street Journal. Related, obesity is an expensive epidemic, pumping diabetes rates sky high.
- Personal accountability and family disarray. Our well-intentioned welfare programs require nothing in return from recipients, such as parent training, and dampen initiative. In my rural Illinois setting, Government has too often replaced Dad.

What to do?

- A new political party, maybe the Party for the Common Good; we may be individualist by nature, but we're all in this together. The two major parties are bankrupt. The

Democratic Party offers little but identity hand-wringing and more spending; the GOP, more tax cuts paid with debt.

The Republican Party started out as a third party, and Lincoln won the presidency with just 39 percent of the vote. I think a plurality of voters would resonate to the call to address tough, even uncomfortable, baseline issues.

- A national spreadsheet (today's term is "dashboard") that annually tracks and puts in our faces the trendlines of our progress or decline on issues such as those above. The Party for the Common Good could take the lead in this, as part of its focus on the future.
- A civic Great Awakening, similar to the rousing religious awakenings that swept our new nation in the early 19th Century and transformed lives. I call on leading groups across the spectrum such as the conservative Heritage Foundation, the League of Women Voters and the AFI-CIO to rise up in coalition and lead the charge.

I worry readers might smile at my musings, as if our situation is beyond resolve. Yet, absent action on the fundamental problems, I worry about the future of our City upon a Hill, and of our grandchildren.