



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #167 — JUNE 25, 2012

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No Praise, Only Blame for President Obama

(posted by Steven W. Baker / SteveB, June 25, 2012)

If Republicans were starting to skewer him for high gasoline prices a while ago, in all fairness, shouldn't they be praising and thanking President Obama for much lower gasoline prices now? NO! That would involve too much morality, respect, and honesty, all things in very short supply with the 2012 GOP.

"Gas Prices Expected to Dip Below \$3 This Fall" by Kathryn Tuggle, Reuters/Fox

June 22, 2012, (<http://www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2012/06/22/gas-prices-expected-to-dip-below-3-this-fall/>)

Here's a silver lining to the slow economic recovery: lower prices at the pump.

Experts expect the prolonged weakness in the economic recovery to result in a substantial decrease in gas prices later this year. "Gas prices could hit the \$3 mark in the next few months, and you may see some prices below that dot in [some places in] the country in the next couple of weeks," says Tom Kloza of the Oil Price Information Service. "I'm not in the camp that thinks we're going to see a collapse in oil prices similar to 2008, but the market is definitely worried about that."

The current national average for regular unleaded gasoline stands at \$3.45 per gallon, down from 2011 highs of \$3.62 per gallon, according to the AAA Fuel Gauge Report. Crude oil is currently trading down 9.63% for the month of June—and experienced a 4% drop on Thursday alone, the largest one-day percentage drop since December 2011, according to Dow Jones.

Moving into autumn, Kloza expects confidence in gas futures to remain weak, and once Labor Day has passed, he says demand will drop even further. He adds gas prices should reach their lowest point for the year between Halloween and the upcoming presidential election.

However, two big variables have the potential to disrupt this downward trend: hurricane season and the situation in Iran.

"You do have hurricane season approaching, and the notion that Iran is going to create a little mischief in July or August with its nuclear talks. Either one could throw a fly into the ointment," says Kloza. "If a hurricane comes ashore at Corpus Christie, then that really changes the picture."

Moving into autumn, Kloza says the wholesale price of regular unleaded gas will be around \$2.25 per gallon. To calculate the retail price, Kloza adds 70 cents, putting the price paid at the pump at around \$2.95 per gallon.

"If there were such a thing as retail futures, they would be trading for November and December at just under \$3. However, oil markets are all about reactions and overreactions, so don't go out and buy a hummer yet."

Although consumers may be excited with the prospect of cheaper gas, Stephen Schork, editor at the Schork Report, says the price is a double-edged sword.

"We're looking at a nice discount for consumers, but we're getting that because of further economic contraction and fears that the economy is going to get worse," says Schork. "In February, the concern was that we didn't have enough supply, and now the concern is that we don't have enough demand."

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<u>20120622-01</u>	11:40	Pam	Re: "The New Obama Doctrine, A Six-Point Plan for Global War" (reply to Dennis, FotM Newsletter #166)
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That's what I was thinking--sounds like a plan to me. Of course, there is the possibility of unexpected consequences, but that doesn't mean we should keep using the same old methods or not come up with innovative strategies. The 21st c. isn't going to look like the 20th, any more than the 20th looked like the 19th. What's the saying? Change or die. One problem "modern man" faces, IMHO, is too much exposure to possible dangers lurking everywhere. We are constantly reminded of how many terrible things could happen to us, and soon: pandemics,

coastal flooding, severe storms, dangerous levels of carbon in the air, shortages of water in agricultural areas, shrinking ice caps, increasing temperatures that will bring disease-carrying bugs into northern climes and increase the demand for air conditioning, and the list goes on. We, I at least, carry all this around in my head pretty much constantly. Sometimes I push it into the background, but usually AT LEAST once a day I recognize and worry about how dismal everything is. Am I the only one who thinks this way?

What gives me a modicum of comfort is the belief/hope that smart people somewhere are figuring out what to do about all these things. I'm glad the Obama administration is pursuing unconventional means of warfare. Obama has taken on the responsibility for drone hits himself, which I find courageous. He's not hiding behind underlings who will take the fall if something goes wrong. Yes, I worry about the police using drones to spy on ordinary citizens, but I'd rather use a drone to take out an Al Quaida leader than invade a whole country. I hate secrets, but I understand that our survival may depend on them.

20120622-02	11:48	Pam	Re: R0mney Tells Governors to Lie About Recovery (reply to SteveB, FotM Newsletter #166)
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What gets me is that Romney et al., put more energy and thought into trashing the other guy than in finding real solutions. Is there a Republican you can think of who is actually putting the welfare of the country, and not the party, first? I can't think of any.

20120622-03	13:53	SteveB	"Health Care: Give the People What They Want"
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"Health Care: Give the People What They Want" by Robert Scheer, Truthdig/NationofChange

June 22, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/health-care-give-people-what-they-want-1340371311>)

The nutty thing about the health care debate that will play a prominent role in the next election is that most Americans want pretty much the same outcome: to control costs without sacrificing quality. And that's not what either major-party candidate is offering. Few think that Obamacare, a Romneycare descendant that contains the same kind of individual mandate the then-governor of Massachusetts signed into law, will get us to that desired goal. Nor would Mitt Romney, who has been reborn as a celebrant of the old, pre-Obama system with a few nips and tucks.

As the nation awaits a Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of the Obama health care approach, a new Associated Press-GfK poll suggests that the vast majority of Americans want Congress to come up with a better plan. They know that the current system is unsustainable. Only a third of those polled favored the law President Barack Obama signed, but according to the AP, "...Whatever people think of the law, they don't want a Supreme Court ruling against it to be the last word on health care reform." The article continued, "More than three-fourths of Americans want their political leaders to undertake a new effort, rather than leave the health care system alone if the court rules against the law, according to the poll."

That sentiment underscores the opportunity missed by Obama, who limited his ambition to what Big Pharma and the insurance giants would accept as "reform" in a system that they had so successfully exploited. Obamacare is a faux reform born of opportunism, as was Romney's original version: Play ball with those who have profited most from the run-up of medical costs and expect them to make it more affordable.

Two dynamics doomed the experiment. First, the new Democratic president wanted to launch a bold progressive program, but rather than channel the spirit of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to address the economic crisis that he inherited, he continued the bailouts begun under George W. Bush and fixed on health care reform instead of the financial pain being suffered by average Americans.

The second dynamic that undercut the health care bill was an over eagerness on the part of the new White House operatives to collaborate with the profiteers in the very industry targeted by reform.

The email trail of cave-ins to the medical industry heavyweights is startlingly clear, and it is difficult to quarrel with the headline on a *Wall Street Journal* story: "Emails Reveal How the White House Bought Big Pharma." Except, as a related editorial in the WSJ makes clear, it was the pharmaceutical industry that did the buying, with "a \$150 million advertising campaign coordinated with the White House political shop."

What the industry bought was an end to the notion of a health care "public option," and a guarantee of no serious restrictions on drug prices, arranged by then White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, who was in close communication with the lobbyists involved. The Journal article pointed to the cynical language of the emails exchanged, quoting one incriminating note from a lobbyist: "Rahm asked for Harry and Louise ads thru third party. We've already contacted the agent." The American Medical Association and others also were in on the fix, yet with all of that power being exercised the public wasn't conned. As the WSJ editorialized (it galls me to agree with that newspaper's editorialists), "The miracle is that despite this collusion of big government and big business, Obamacare has received the public scorn that it deserves."

But scorn for an individual mandate that compels consumers to purchase something they don't want does not translate into a rational alternative to the current mess. Californian Gary Hess, a retired school administrator and a Republican, is quoted in the AP story about the new poll as saying that he wants the Supreme Court to reject the entire Obama plan but that he still wants the government to retain the requirement that insurance companies cover people regardless of their prior medical conditions. "There needs to be compromise on both sides," he said. Clearly, any good compromise must include both control on costs and the availability of health care to the needy in places other than the very expensive emergency room.

Let me humbly suggest that as an alternative to a mandatory system rejected by the majority, we return to the idea of covering most people by attracting them to quality public and private programs through consumer choice, and that one of those choices be a version of the public option we now offer seniors. It's called Medicare and it works splendidly.

20120622-04	15:02	NormF	Re: Cartoon: Bank CEOs Play Us All for Suckers (reply to SteveG, FotM Newsletter #166)
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The cartoon is funny!

20120622-05	15:13	SteveB	Fw: UltraViolet Petition: Support Paid Family Leave for Working Moms & Dads
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from UltraViolet:

Each year, millions of women and men face a gut-wrenching decision: stay home to care for a newborn baby in the crucial first weeks after birth, or return immediately to work to make sure the family can make ends meet.

In the US, only 11% of workers have access to paid family leave through their employers—barely one in 10 people. In fact, the United States is the only developed country that doesn't ensure that parents can take paid family leave after a child is born or gets sick, or to take care of aging family members.

Right now, we have an amazing opportunity to change this—but time is short. We're partnering with the National Partnership for Women & Families, MomsRising.org, and Working Mother magazine to get Congress behind national legislation to provide paid family leave—and the law is modeled off of incredibly successful programs from California and New Jersey.

Already, nearly 20,000 people have signed their petition demanding paid family leave in the United States--and we need to triple those numbers before a huge day of action and meetings with key lawmakers on Capitol Hill on July 10. We need to show that paid family leave is something voters everywhere support if we're going to get Congress to prioritize it this year. Will you sign the petition?

Add your name to the petition:

http://act.weareultraviolet.org/sign/familyleave/?rd=1&t=1&referring_akid=120.359331.cz4KIM.

Family leave isn't just about parents and young children, either. It's also about taking time off to care for an ailing family member, or having the time to deal with your own personal medical issues. Basically, it's the ability to deal with emergencies without also facing financial catastrophe.

And research shows that paid leave pays:¹

- Analysis shows a correlation between access to paid leave and more regular checkups and immunizations for infants.
- Mothers who took paid leave were more likely to be working and making higher wages in the year following an infant's birth.
- Both mothers and fathers who took paid leave to care for an infant were less likely to be on public assistance.
- Research also shows paid leave prevents major financial loss. Adults forced to leave the workplace to care for a sick parent lost an average of over \$300,000 in income.
- New parents in California, and particularly lower-wage workers, who took paid leave under the state's pioneering program were more likely to return to their same employers—good for both workers and businesses.

Paid family leave isn't just good social policy, it's good economic policy. And it's time for Congress to recognize that. Sign your name to the petition, and help build on the momentum of this important issue.

Thanks for speaking out, Nita, Shaunna and Kat, the UltraViolet team

Sources

¹"The Case for Paid Family and Medical Leave," The National Partnership for Women & Families, April 2012, <http://act.weareultraviolet.org/go/166?t=5&akid=120.359331.cz4KIM>.

20120622-06 18:36 SteveB "SpyBike GPS Tracker Is Like LoJack for Bikes"

"SpyBike GPS Tracker Is Like LoJack for Bikes" by Chris Weiss, GizMag

June 20, 2012, (http://www.gizmag.com/spybike-gps-tracker/22999/?utm_source=Gizmag+Subscribers&utm_campaign=39da8fbbff-UA-2235360-4&utm_medium=email)

The National Bike Registry tells us that thousands of bikes are stolen every day in the United States alone, estimating a cost of around U.S. \$200 million per year. A stolen bike can take hundreds or thousands of dollars out of your pocket, leave you without a means of transit and turn into a frustrating, angering experience. The SpyBike Covert Bicycle GPS Tracker protects you from theft by tracking down your bike.

They may deserve every expletive-laced, demeaning name in the book, but there's no denying that bike thieves are crafty, determined folks. Even if you lock your bike up, thieves have a way of cutting, prying, hammering and hacking through your line of defense ... or maybe they'll just saw the fence post that the bike is secured to.

Since you're not a professional thief, it's difficult to protect your bike from every possible scenario, and your bike could get stolen even if you make every attempt to lock it securely. The chances of you getting the bike back are slim, and you may not see it again even if the police recover it.

The SpyBike GPS tracker from Integrated Trackers gives you a second line of defense. You should still lock your bike, but if a thief happens to break it free, you have a means to get it back. The device mounts inside the headset, where it is hidden and unassuming. You use a special wrench to secure the device, so it's not easily removed.

Activate the unit when you leave your bike using the accompanying electronic key ring. If the bike is taken before being deactivated with your key (i.e. stolen), the vibration sensor initiates the tracking system, which sends you an alert SMS message and begins uploading coordinates to the cloud every 20 seconds until the vibration stops. The unit will activate again when the vibration starts up (i.e. the thief is riding or transporting the bicycle), so you can continue keeping up on its whereabouts.

You can keep track of the bike's location via Integrated Trackers' website, and then relay its location to the police. If you forgot to arm the unit before your bike was stolen, you can remotely activate it by sending an SMS message. It checks its messages automatically every six hours, so it will begin tracking when it gets your message.

The tracking service is free, but users do have to equip the unit with a pay-as-you-go SIM card and will be charged for the data used in uploading coordinates. This may seem like an extra cost and work, but combined with the quad-band GSM modem, it allows the unit to work with nearly any mobile network in the world. You can configure it to the carrier that offers the best coverage in your area to ensure that it works when you need it. The unit uses GPRS to upload data, not SMS, and Integrated Trackers says it costs a fraction of a penny to send each update (in the U.K.).

The SpyBike runs on a rechargeable lithium-ion battery. Integrated Trackers says that the battery can go for months between charges. The unit will send you an SMS message when the battery needs charging.

The SpyBike does have some limitations. Because it relies on GPS, the device will stop operating effectively if your bike is taken inside or anywhere there isn't a clear view of the sky. In that case, the unit will step down to GSM cellular triangulation. The company says GSM is only accurate to about 650 feet (200 m), which could prove all but useless in a building-dense environment like the center of a city. In fact, even GPS's claimed 16 to 82 feet (5 to 25 m) accuracy won't necessarily bring you right to the thief's doorstep.

Having a hidden tracking system keeping you updated on the bike's location will almost certainly increase your chances of recovery. By integrating it into the headset, Integrated Trackers makes it unassuming enough that thieves may not think to check for it, and difficult enough to remove that they won't be able to just pull it out or break it off. The remote activation feature is a smart inclusion that keeps the device active even if you don't have the key ring or your bike is forcibly stolen.

The SpyBike starts at U.S. \$153.58. The following video shows you how it works in a theft scenario:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEeQCe2F_1I&feature=player_embedded.

20120622-07	21:44	SteveG	Magic Quiz
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1. The completely absurd theory that all 7,000,000,000 human beings are simultaneously being monitored 24 hours a day, every day of their lives, by an immortal, invisible being for the purposes of reward or punishment in the "afterlife" comes from the field of:

- a. Children's fairy tales.
- b. Medieval mythology.
- c. New-age pseudoscience.
- d. Christianity.

2. You are about 70% likely to believe the entire Universe began less than 10,000 years ago with only one man, one woman, and a talking snake if you are a:

- a. Historian.
- b. Geologist.
- c. Astronomer.
- d. Christian.

3. If I honestly believe that, when I think silent thoughts like "Please, God, help me pass my exam tomorrow.", some invisible being is reading my mind and will intervene and alter what would otherwise be the course of history to help me, I am:

- a. A delusional schizophrenic.
- b. A naïve child, too young to know how silly that is.
- c. An ignorant farmer from Sudan who never had the benefit of even a 5th-grade education.
- d. Your average Christian.

4. If I have convinced myself that gay sex is a choice and not genetic, but then have no explanation as to why only gay people have homosexual urges, I am:

- a. A gifted psychologist.
- b. A well respected geneticist.
- c. A highly educated sociologist.
- d. A Christian with a typical ability to ignore inconvenient facts.

5. Millions and millions of Catholics believe that bread and wine turns into the actual flesh and blood of a dead Jew from 2,000 years ago because:

- a. There are obvious visible changes in the comestibles after the priest does his hocus pocus.
- b. Tests have confirmed a divine presence in the bread and wine.
- c. Now and then their god shows up and confirms this story.
- d. Their religious convictions tell them to blindly accept this completely fucking absurd nonsense.

6. If I believe that an all-powerful being, capable of creating the entire cosmos, watches me have sex to make sure I don't do anything "naughty", I am:

- a. A victim of child molestation.
- b. A rape victim trying to recover.
- c. A mental patient with paranoid delusions.
- d. A Christian.

7. The only discipline known to often cause people to kill others they have never met and/or to commit suicide in its furtherance is:

- a. Architecture.
- b. Philosophy.
- c. Archeology.
- d. Religion.

8. What is it that most differentiates science and all other intellectual disciplines from religion?

- a. Religion tells people not only what they should believe, but what they are morally obliged to believe on pain of divine retribution, whereas science, economics, medicine, etc. have no "sacred cows" in terms of doctrine and go where the evidence leads them.
- b. Religion can make a claim such as "There is a triune god comprising God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.", and be totally immune from experimentation and challenge, whereas science can only make factual assertions when supported by considerable evidence.
- c. Science and the scientific method is universal and consistent all over the world, whereas religion is regional, and a person's religious convictions, no matter how deeply held, are clearly nothing more than an accident of birth.
- d. All of the above.

9. If I am found wandering the streets flagellating myself, wading into a filthy river, mutilating my child's genitals, or kneeling down in a church believing that an invisible being is somehow reading my innermost thoughts and wishes, I am likely driven by:

- a. A deep psychiatric issue.
- b. An irrational fear or phobia.
- c. A severe mental degeneration caused by years of drug abuse.
- d. My religious belief.

10. Who am I? I don't pay any taxes. I never have. Any money my organization earns is tax free and my own salary is also tax free at the federal, state, and local levels. Despite contributing nothing to society, but still enjoying all its benefits, I feel I have the right to tell others what to do. I am:

- a. A sleazy Wall Street banker.
- b. A Mafia boss.
- c. A drug pusher.
- d. A Catholic priest, Protestant minister, Jewish rabbi, or Muslim imam.

11. What do the following authors all have in common – Jean-Paul Sartre, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Victor Hugo, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, René Descartes, Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Locke, and Blaise Pascal?

- a. They are among the most gifted writers the world has ever known.
- b. They concentrated on opposing dogma and opening the human mind and spirit to the wonders of free thought and intellectual freedom.
- c. They were intimidated by the Catholic Church and put on the Church's list of prohibited authors.
- d. All of the above.

12. The AIDS epidemic will kill tens of millions in poor African and South American countries before we defeat it. Condoms are an effective way to curtail its spread. As the Pope still has significant influence over the less educated masses in these parts of the World, he has exercised this power by:

- a. Using some of the Vatican's incomprehensible wealth to educate these vulnerable people on health, family planning, and condom use.
- b. Supporting government programs that distribute condoms to high-risk groups.
- c. Using its myriad churches in these regions to distribute condoms.
- d. Scaring people into not using condoms, based upon his view that it is better that a person die than go against the Vatican's position on contraceptives.

Always remember that silence gives consent. Written by the LaCrosse Area Freethought Society, (<http://www.lcafs.org/>).

20120623-01 08:45 Pam Re: Magic Quiz (reply to SteveG, above)

Excellent!!

20120623-02 11:50 SteveB Fw: Daily Kos Petition: No Corporate Resources for Political Purposes Without Shareholder Opt-In Permission!

Please sign our petition to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid asking him to introduce legislation requiring corporations to get opt-in permission from shareholders in order to use company resources for political purposes.

Click here to sign: http://campaigns.dailykos.com/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=165.

With *Citizens United*, the activist conservative Supreme Court ruled that corporations could spend unlimited amounts of unregulated money to buy elections.

Now, that same activist conservative Supreme Court ruled that unions have to get opt-in permission from non-members to use dues for political purposes.

In response, sign our petition asking Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to introduce legislation requiring corporations to get opt-in permission from shareholders in order to be allowed to use company resources for political purposes.

Keep fighting, Markos Moulitsas, Publisher, Daily Kos

20120623-03	12:25	SteveM	Fw: Post Turtle
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There is a lot of truth here. Think about it.

[Source of original email unknown. –SteveB]



While suturing a cut on the hand of a 75-year-old rancher, whose hand was caught in the squeeze gate while working cattle, the doctor struck up a conversation with the old man. Eventually the topic got around to Obama and his role as our president.

The old rancher said, "Well, ya know, Obama is a 'post turtle'."

Not being familiar with the term, the doctor asked him what a 'post turtle' was.

The old rancher said, "When you're driving down a country road and you come across a fence post with a turtle balanced on top, that's a 'post turtle'."

Seeing the puzzled look on the doctor's face, he continued to explain: "You know he didn't get up there by himself; he doesn't belong up there; he doesn't know what to do while he's up there; he's elevated beyond his ability to function; and **you just wonder what kind of dumb a*s put him up there to begin with.**"

20120624-01 06:14 SteveB Re: Post Turtle (reply to SteveM, above)

It's interesting that this joke was first applied to Bush (in 2000-2001) then to Palin eight years later.

<http://www.snopes.com/politics/humor/postturtle.asp>

20120623-04 12:29 SteveB "Three Big Lies about Big Government"

"Three Big Lies about Big Government" by Christopher Petrella, NationofChange

June 23, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/three-big-lies-about-big-government-1340458180>)

Many conservatives who stylize themselves as defenders of small government lean precariously on Reagan-era platitudes when pressed to justify their affections. Though Reagan's alluringly demagogic 1981 decree that "government is not the solution to our problems [but rather], government is the problem" is easy to chew, its arbitrary application has led to a number of misconceptions about the role, size, and scope of "government."

Time and again conservatives characterize those of us on the left as "large government loyalists," as "tax and spend liberals" who "support the growth of an inefficient and parasitic public sector." Unfortunately, the tales that conservatives use to vituperate those of on the left are as shallow as they are tall.

Let's take a few minutes to debunk three common conservative critiques lodged against supposed "big government" sympathizers.

Myth #1: President Obama has created a "spending inferno."

Did not Harvard Business School teach you anything, Mitt? In FY 2009—the last of George W. Bush's presidency — federal spending rose by 18 percent from \$2.98 trillion to \$3.52 trillion. Then, in FY 2010—the first budget overseen by President Obama—federal government outlays fell by nearly 2 percent. In FY 2011 spending rose 4.3 percent to \$3.60 trillion and in FY 2012 spending is scheduled to rise 0.7 percent to \$3.63 trillion, according to the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) most recent budgetary estimates. Finally in FY 2013 — the final budget of President Obama's term — spending is scheduled to fall 1.3 percent to \$3.58 trillion. In total, federal spending under President Obama will have risen from \$3.52 trillion to \$3.58 trillion representing an annualized increase of just 0.4 percent. Federal spending is currently increasing at its slowest rate since Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency nearly sixty years ago.

Myth #2: "Government" has become "too big" and "too inefficient" under President Obama.

The most common measure of government size is federal, state, and local expenditures relative to gross domestic product (GDP). According to this index total government expenditures as a percentage of GDP has varied modestly, + 7 percent, from President Bush's last year and office to FY 2012 under President Obama.

Some of this increase, of course, is attributable to expanded federal payments for individuals by way of Social Security and Medicare. However, according to the Office of Management and Budget "defense and international spending" under President Obama has also increased by nearly 10 percent since President Bush left office, an argumentatively inconvenient truth for conservatives.

Concurrent to relatively stable spending-to-GDP ratios, it's paradoxically possible to argue that the federal government is actually contracting. Here's why. According to data recently released by the St. Louis FED around 16.5 percent of labor-eligible adults now work for the government, a figure down from its peak of 20 percent in 1975 under republican President Gerald Ford. Further, as a percentage of total employed Americans, federal government workers have been dropping steadily and are now near an all time low.

According to the same data-set, state and local governments have employed roughly the same number of employees as a percentage of total U.S. employees for the past forty years or so.

Myth #3: Firing public sector workers like teachers, firefighters, and police officers represents the best strategy for reducing debt incurred by "big government" spending.

The compensation of public school teachers, firefighters, and police officers is largely subsidized by the collection of state and local taxes. Although total U.S. debt stands at a towering \$57 trillion, red ink at the state and local level accounts for less than 5 percent of total indebtedness. (State and local governments don't wage endless wars.) National (federal) debt comprises 28 percent of total debt and the remaining 67 percent includes aggregated mortgage, student loan, and credit card debts.

20120623-05	22:09	Charis	"San Juan: Coldest Night of the Year" & "Porongo (Bolivia): Firewalkers of San Juan"
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[Tonight is the celebration of San Juan in Bolivia. People stay up all night, party, light fires to stay warm, eat hot dogs, drink local alcoholic drinks, and some people jump over the fires or walk through the burning coals. A good time is had by all the people who don't burst into flames, never to be cold again. -SteveB]

"San Juan: Coldest Night of the Year" by BoliviaBella, (<http://networkedblogs.com/z7MJ7>)

San Juan is celebrated in Bolivia every year on 23 June and is said to be the shortest, and usually the coldest, night of the year.

Typically bonfires are set and people gather all night to sing, play guitar, eat and spend time together, warming by the fire and hoping this really will be the shortest, coldest night of the year so as to get it over with once and for all.

Most bonfires were set in the streets, even in large cities. However, the next morning there was so much smog that authorities have put a stop to that and are now fining anyone who sets a bonfire in town. For environmental reasons, bonfires have been banned in most major cities of Bolivia.

Still, hot dog sales go through the roof as people traditionally roast "panchitos" as they are called, along with pigs, goats, and other animals. The "parrillada" or "churrasco" (as barbeques are called here) usually include hot dogs or sausages, lots of chicha or other alcoholic drinks, and a guitar somewhere in the crowd.

In La Paz, the day after San Juan used to be a holiday as well - not so much because it really is, but because the amount of smoke lingering in the air made it impossible to go outside, much less get to work. However, now that's all been "cleared up" with the bonfire prohibition.

One tradition in La Paz is that anyone who can, will stay up all night, and eat "fricassé" (a thin broth with pieces of pork, ground red chili pepper and chuños, which are dehydrated potatoes) at about 5:00 a.m. in order to warm up.

In some rural towns like Porongo dancers will walk on hot coals to show the spirits they are macho and unafraid of the cold or any other malice they may want to bestow upon them. But mostly, people will just use this as an excuse to combine weathering the cold with having yet another party. So if you're ever in Bolivia in June, bring your jacket and a skewer - there's room at the hearth for everyone. If you're traveling, you might as well make the most of it and enjoy.

"Porongo: Firewalkers of San Juan" by Bolivia Bella, (<http://networkedblogs.com/z7MJ9>)

Just 17 miles Northwest of Santa Cruz there is a small town called Porongo with about 12,000 inhabitants. Most notable are its colonial architecture, church (pictured here), main plaza and antique houses.

The town was founded by Jesuit Friar Santiago Ribero on 22 February, 1714 and it has a church called Iglesia San Juan Bautista (John the Baptist Church) which was built in 1716. It was probably one of the last to be built by Catholic priests in Bolivia. The Bolivian government declared it a National Cultural Heritage site in 1999. Some of Bolivia's best coffees are produced in this area and there is a Coffee Festival each year in June following the town's "Fiesta Patronal", day on which the inhabitants celebrate their Patron Saint (John the Baptist). **The festival of San Juan takes place on June 23rd. Thousands of people flock to the tiny town of Porongo to walk over hot coals. They believe you have to have faith in order to firewalk without getting burned. June 23rd is believed to be the longest and coldest night of the year in Bolivia.**

In September the town celebrates its Festival de la Flauta de Tacuara. The "achachairú", a small fruit found only in Bolivia, also grows plentifully here (try some – they are tart, but delicious!) You can attend the Gran Fiesta del Achachairú in December. In April and May every two years, part of the Baroque Music Festival takes place in the Porongo church as well. The town also has a baroque music school. Porongo is located in one of the nine provinces that are part of Amboró National Park. Families often drive to spend the day and have lunch on Saturday or Sunday.

On the same road you take to Porongo, there is a wonderful outdoor restaurant that has a small lake (huge water lilies!) where you can feed the fish, and a great play area for kids called La Rinconada. It's a great place to enjoy your Sunday lunch. During the rest of the week you can visit the park and grounds, but the restaurant serves only drinks and snack. You can rent it out for events. It features very healthy food, so eat all you want!

Also on this road is the world's largest butterfly sanctuary (and also a 5-star resort and country club) called Mariposario Güembé. Also you can veer off to spend some time at Laguna Capybara, a lagoon where you can take a dip or just relax with a picnic or do some grilling. It has a camping area as well.

The town boasts another unusual characteristic: Michael Bennett, a native of Stoke-on-Trent, England, a gold miner, served as town mayor between 2002 and 2003.

One of my favorite places in Santa Cruz is a family-owned quinta just 3 kilometers north of Porongo. It has a pool, volleyball court, 3 full cabins, indoor and outdoor dining areas, a grill, a full office with Internet, TV, and space for up to 20 to sleep. When you reserve the quinta, you get THE WHOLE QUINTA to yourself. So for a great family weekend, romantic getaway or business hide-out visit Quinta Victoria.

20120624-02	13:34	SteveB	"Apocalypse Now Vogue Engulfs Chicken Littles"
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"Apocalypse Now Vogue Engulfs Chicken Littles" by Robert S. Becker, NationofChange

June 24, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/apocalypse-now-vogue-engulfs-chicken-littles-1340547135>)

Is the sky falling on this Beacon on the Hill, ending a century of Yankee dominance, crushing the greatest, most brashly exceptional nation known to mankind? Is this worldwide wonder of freedom and democracy, the intersection of divine history and human destiny, kaput, on its last legs, about to implode? Not quite, not yet, and that's no endorsement of the status quo: powers-that-be hold high trump cards.

Every generation endures end-of-the world scenarios, and we still dread last century's, nuclear holocaust. Drama -- let alone anxiety -- commands our attention and heartstrings. Pandemics, portable nukes, fiery asteroids, religious mania, starvation, rightwing nuts, and looming climate change, all threaten millions. But anxiety, even nightmare projections, do not mean Armageddon is upon us, nor that pundits suddenly discover reliable crystal balls. Discretion is the better part of this valor.

Global warming looms, likely to cut world population and food production, but that's neither extinction nor end of times – nor reformation destructive capitalism. Want good news? Harvard professor Steven Pinker argues our belligerent species has cut wartime-violence killing sprees. Are we not exiting Iraq, sort of? Life expectancies, even for the impoverished, grow annually, if you count enough people. Only 43 Americans suffered capital punishment in 2011 (half the 2000 totals), mostly in W's Texas. Okay, we live in grim times but take heart: we don't guillotine yet. And most of life's simple pleasures haven't been banned, yet.



Centers hold on

No doubt, systemic cracks abound, thanks to myopic leadership blunders, not just across state and national politics but corporate's best and brightest, sports top dogs, and fundamentalist denominations that turn Jesus into racist warmonger. Pedophilia, misogyny and reaction stalk the west's oldest organized church. But even wobbly, distrusted centers, like moons and planets, can wobble in place a good long time. History testifies to the resilience of status quo, by definition adept at deflecting reform.

Consider how long it took to resolve slavery (or not, as racism lives on), enfranchise women (and minorities), or protect laboring children and the gamut of civil, gender, human and gay rights. Today's well-funded, defensive elite, armed with police forces, high-tech weaponry and media propaganda, so dreads systemic change they equate sharing spoils with "the end of their world."

Fortresses are designed for sieges, and I suspect things get worst before they get better. Yet does that justify the countless catastrophes predicted if that slick liberal, drone-friendly, Wall-Street-funding president doesn't get re-elected? Even more earth-shaking disruptions come from fringe hysterics: national self-destruction descends if that slick liberal, non-citizen (alien, socialist anti-Christ) defies divine will by staying in office. What a quandary: a single election deciding which of two ways our world ends.

But anxiety aside, where's compelling data that today's enfeebled "Dying Empire" is expiring? Isn't there equivalent evidence that reinforces retrenchment, fat cats shoring up weak spots and securing walls that resist reform? Few imagine violent domestic insurrection (despite guns galore) because so many project bloody retribution by police armies informed by drone surveillance. Though whistleblowers are punished, gun sales flourish, as do third political parties, and the Internet remains free, though gigantic government computers violate our privacy. No doubt, were the belligerent, rabid right to commandeer our entire government, brace for dreadful "systemic reforms." But odds favor more status quo and 40 fierce Senators trumping change.

Mythic hill to die on

Our western culture has one predominant catch-all for the end of the world, courtesy of the New Testament finale: Armageddon. Ar-ma-ged-don is "the battle between the forces of good and evil predicted to mark the end of the world and precede the Day of Judgment." (Revelation 16:16). With "ar" meaning "hill," derivation is less epic, an earthly hill called Megiddo where our species gets its comeuppance. High time, say today's angry moralists, echoing the irritable Old Testament chief.

What, is human history not already battleground between perceived good vs. indicted evil-doers? Have we not moved, however haltingly for 200 years, from widespread dictators to greater distribution of goodies to wider audiences, respect for law and judicial processes, even expansive self-determination?

True, our three-decade Yankee regression by leapers of faith in cahoots with business reactionaries is gumming up progress, but I trust the long-term, positive arc of history endures. Yet, where are alternative visions or philosophies to trigger serious, left-leaning systemic reform? Successful revolutions have definite contexts, especially breakthrough concepts (like democracy) that disrupt fixed communal mindsets. What revolutionary ideas can persuade our variegated masses to become rebels with a cause? In that absence, let us assess the daunting task:

1. Economic status quo is besieged but is hardly buckling. Despite ungodly concentrations of wealth, the core capitalistic order -- reflected by healthy world stock markets and international business as usual -- is accelerating from recession. Occupy protests urge more equitable distribution but I don't yet see key strategies that garner critical mass support. Has this admirable protest impacted national voting at all, as did the Tea Party? Bruised candidate and lousy campaigner, Romney the patrician quickly overcame high negatives to pull even with a charismatic, personally-popular president, as you'd expect from a strong foe.

2. World leadership, with few exceptions, stands with high growth and big business, whether here, struggling Europe, booming South America, Middle East (dictatorial strongholds), or across highly productive Indian-Asian powerhouses. China represents state capitalism on steroids, with autocratic leaders restraining mounting internal contradictions and income discrepancies.

Where's the legitimate, unified alternative -- even a major movement -- that challenges the world's ever-evolving capitalist systems, paying homage to private property, profit incentives, centralized corporations, and monopolistic expansionism? Despite population surges, resource restraints and natural warnings galore, our president merrily targets 3.5% annual GDP growth, as if it's 1950.

3. Yes, America is faltering, mainly against China, rising Asian producers and bright spots, like Brazil. Yet power shifts don't produce the end of the world or power to more people, and China, with insatiable needs for oil, resources, and factories, is buying and/or financially colonizing the third world. Copycat top-down ownership plus nasty environmental exploitation drive Chinese expansion, mimicking excesses of late-western capitalism. Backed by wildly expensive military prowess, America and our large corporations will keep their castles and hold their own, with only token nods to funding externalities (what progress truly costs), just like 1950.

4. In fact, military power balances haven't drastically changed since WWII, except that ex-communist Russia stumbled, displaced by quasi-communist China. Western militarism (with its religious commitment to violence, whatever threat or foe) plods on, without budget cuts for guns, tanks or drones. Yankee militarism morphs into limited, "smarter" conflicts, less costly in money and lives, perhaps even better at killing enemies, not non-combatants.

5. Populist movements, however conspicuous, are struggling (as in Egypt), assuming they get the necessary decades to foster functional, democratic governments. No easy fixes for severe tribal battles and daunting shortfalls in education, medicine and infrastructure. Protests like '60's anti-war eruptions aren't yet shaking advanced countries, even though politics and elections promise mainly crude propaganda by billionaires. Where's the outrage towards zero debate about structural challenges, replaced by trivial squabbling over "impossible deficits" or the menace of "big government"?

In short, though there is good news, where's persuasive evidence the world's entrenched are dying? Where are critical mass protests to combat economic systems showing their age (and contradictions)? Corrupt, crony capitalism won't be overturned because income disparities widen, and "regular" capitalism promises employment needs for decades. Early in defining tasks and foes, let's beware of declaring premature dissolutions.

Whatever narrative upswings of history, and shifts towards empowerment, expect nasty bumps along the way. That quickens if the cynical withdraw, as in "we're all screwed, why fight"? Or if others cling to a president whose populist talk contrasts with neo-liberal appointments, advisers, programs and decisions. Time not to overstate the

sky is falling but assess the full power of the opposition and plan tactical moves and strategic alliances. For me, reinstating the best of our Constitutional restraints is a mandatory first step, with intense pressure on this president. Reform driven by our best, most inclusive legacies is a compelling philosophic engine, with a realistic re-dedication to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for the vast majority, not the privileged top tier.

Historic note: systemic change needs a context and a realistic new direction. Our revolution makes that point: finally, a landowning, asset-holding elite, with a nod towards halfway democracy, decided colonial obedience to a backward power was out -- and concepts of self-rule grew, though over time. Had England not demanded intrusive new taxes (for costly, far-off European wars), the colony would not have rushed to wean itself from the mother country. Our revolutionary founders (all one-third of the country) didn't revolt because they hated being English, but they refused to be bullied, specifically denied the economic and social freedoms they had enjoyed for decades. Inspect the Articles of Confederation, where weak state self-rule dominates, to appreciate how America's truly revolutionary advance (a centralized, federal union) wasn't the first dream, nor the first reform.

[20120624-03](#) 22:18 SteveG U.S. Average Income on the Rise!

Since 1973 the median income in America has risen 7%.

Makes you kind of proud doesn't it?

Just had to throw some sarcasm in.

[20120624-04](#) 22:45 SteveB Re: U.S. Average Income on the Rise! (reply to SteveG, above)

I'm so darned proud of our incredibly great, selfless generation that I could just pop!

What can you say? This is all the evidence anyone could need that we strayed from the path of prosperity.

When we had it made and almost nothing was broken, why did we feel we had to reinvent the wheel and conduct a great social and political experiment like radical Conservatism?

Reagan and Bush, practically by themselves, deconstructed the engine of creation our parents had so carefully crafted. WHY?

(I sure hope that's 7% AFTER inflation!)



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—Friends of the Middle,
Steven W. Baker (SteveB), Editor/Moderator

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