

Dream.” Unfortunately, this is not remotely possible, and many citizens of the United States have difficulties living in this country. The United States of America is a great country to live in, if not the best, but is also far from perfect.

Everything in America could be improved in one way or the other. Education and health care are huge government issues that need improvement in order to make the United States of America a more suitable place to live.

Firstly, education in America is one of if not the most important factors to a successful career and life for US citizens. Getting a high school diploma is still very important, but it is now becoming more and more of a necessity to attend college and get a degree. According to usnews.com, the value of a college degree is greater than it has been in nearly half a century, at least when compared to the prospect of not getting a degree. Among millennials ages 25 to 32, median annual earnings for fulltime working college degree holders are \$17,500 greater than for those with high school diplomas only. The only problem is that college has increasingly become less and less affordable.

According to the College Board, the average cost of tuition and fees for the 2013-2014 academic year was \$30,094 at private colleges, \$8,893 for state residents at public colleges, and \$22,203 for out-of-state residents attending public universities. Most Americans don't even consider public schools, which are most often referred to as the least expensive, affordable. According to the Huffington Post, 62 percent said they believe most people are not able to afford the cost of a public college education. If the majority of America could afford college to achieve their career goals, America will be a better and more successful country. If something such as raising taxes benefits colleges in that it will be more affordable, America will have more opportunity to strive for success.

Health care is another issue that I feel should be mentioned. It is said that President Obama and the United States in general wants to make healthcare more affordable to everyone. Government run health care systems, such as Obamacare, are free and low-cost government run programs that result in higher costs and everyone receiving the same poor quality health care. Health care should remain privatized so that the people who may need better health care and can also afford it without a huge deductible may receive it.

In conclusion, ensuring that health care remains the same and reducing the cost of education will undeniably improve America.

SPENCER ECKERT, WOODSTOCK UNION HIGH SCHOOL (FINALIST)

Remember when you got your first job? I'm sure it was an exciting and proud moment. It could be that you weren't even concerned about your hourly pay, but as time went by, I'm certain that changed and you realized that you work hard and want to be compensated for that. In today's society, it can be hard to earn a good living wage from a “decent” job. But for many people, they don't get good pay even when they should. The low minimum wage today makes it difficult for people to survive and make a living.

There are a number of compelling reasons to increase the minimum wage. Let's begin with the economy. It's simple; raising the minimum wage would have a positive effect on the economy by giving workers more money to spend. It would be good to raise the minimum wage to \$15 because there would be more money being pumped into the economy. If workers get paid more, then they are happier and with a better mood

they will want to spend more. It gives people the confidence to spend more and when they spend more they are fueling the economy. “A raise for minimum wage earners will put more money in more families' pockets, which will be spent on goods and services, stimulating economic growth locally and nationally,” according to the “Minimum Wage Mythbusters.”

Increasing minimum wage has a positive impact on the working family. It helps them to make ends meet, and at the same time enables them to spend some money. When they spend money, they are fueling the economy.

Raising the minimum wage would not cause any job loss or unemployment, and most work places would not go out of business if they were to raise the minimum wage. In fact there would probably be less turnover. Therefore, companies would reduce the amount of money they spend on training. If companies compensate their employees with better wages than those employees are happier and more committed to that company. So raising the minimum wage can have a positive effect on companies. “Raising the minimum wage would be good for our economy. A higher minimum wage not only increases workers' incomes—which is sorely needed to boost demand and get the economy going—but it also reduces turnover, cuts the costs that low-paid employers impose on taxpayers, and pushes businesses toward a high-road, high-human-capital model.” (Said T. William Lester, David Madland, and Jackie Odum, in their article Raising the Minimum Wage Would Help, Not Hurt, Our Economy)

One reason why the minimum wage should be increased to \$15 is because it would help a lot of people get out of the poverty level. Too many people in the country who work at minimum wage jobs currently depend on the government for other help. People subscribe to government programs such as food stamps and school breakfast and lunch programs, just to name a few. “According to a Michigan survey shows that families who work at fast food businesses are much more likely to enroll in safety net programs than the workforce as a whole, such as food stamps.”

Another reason why the minimum wage should be increased to \$15 is because of the positive psychological benefits. It would raise people's self-esteem and self-worth and would also allow children in these poverty-level homes to have better opportunities in the future. If these children are able to improve their performance in school, then they are likely to continue education which would allow them to pursue better paying jobs in the future. If they have better paying jobs, they are no longer on government programs and they have the opportunity and confidence to spend money which fuel the economy. It is a positive cycle. “A raise in the minimum wage would not only help many families escape or avoid poverty, but could also significantly boost their children's academic performance and future adult earnings,” said Yannet M. Lathrop, a Policy Analyst who has conducted studies on raising the minimum wage.

There really is no downside to raising the minimum wage. Raising the minimum wage to \$15 would be good for employers, workers, families, and the economy. Raising the minimum wage would lead to these dramatic outcomes: getting families out of poverty, giving children a better education and future, giving employers committed workers, putting more money into the economy, giving people the confidence to spend more and making people happy.

JACOB GALLOW, MISSISQUOI VALLEY UNION HIGH SCHOOL (FINALIST)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated, “A man is born free, but everywhere we are in chains.”

Freedom is something everyone seeks, but most will never experience it. Given more power, the government becomes a wolf among sheep. People flock to the sight of freedom, only to see that even something so great has its limits. Governments tend to give more things to the people, things to give them a sense of security, a place to sleep, somewhere to work, to do as they wish. Those things come at a price, the price of freedom. The more the people receive, especially on the topic of security, the more liberties are contracted.

Are we truly free? America sits in the shadow of threats every day, for there will always be some person who despises the place we call home. Security is something we, as Americans, take for granted. While we sit in the shadows, not even aware of it, brave men and women risk their lives and die every day for the security of their homeland, wishing for a safe place for their friends and family to live. Yet, here we sit in the symbolic country of freedom, with someone always looking over our shoulder. That security we take for granted tends to take away the liberties and freedoms we were given many years ago. The more of a grip the government has on its people, the more the people are caged.

Our troops are out fighting for our government, and our government's wishes, but have we ever stopped to think of what our own troops went through? According to Veteran's Inc., around 529,000 and 840,000 veterans are homeless each year, one in ten veterans are disabled related to war injuries. According to CNN, 22 veterans take their own lives each and every day, some resulting from PTSD, a disorder soldiers get after experiencing the horrors of war. Veteran unemployment rate is another issue among all of these. What can we, as Americans, do to help our Veterans. We surely are not doing enough, and those numbers keep climbing. What about those families of soldiers, what do they have to go through each and every day with a spouse, parent, or sibling off at war, fighting people because our governments wants to be “involved.”

We don't need to be caught in everyone else's business, unless it becomes our business, and if we do get involved, we need to back up our soldiers first. Our country had to solve our own problems in 1861-1865, let others do the same.

Freedom isn't really free. Here in America, we are promised freedom, but the securities we receive and the democracy we spread binds us in chains, not allowing us to roam free. Sure there needs to be laws enforced, yes there needs to be security, but we need freedom too. Our government needs to focus on our country. Will we as Americans allow the anaconda, known as the government, to strangle us, the people, as mice?●

RECOGNIZING THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON FOOTBALL TEAM

● Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I wish to honor the University of Oregon's football team for its tremendous season. The Fighting Ducks of Oregon accumulated 13 wins with only 2 losses this year, which accounts for the most wins in team history. This season culminated with the Ducks winning their 11th Pac-12 Conference championship, playing in the first NCAA college football playoff, winning their third-ever Rose Bowl and reaching the National Championship game. It is truly a great year to be a Duck.

Recognition should not only be given to this football team's success on the

field but also to the hard work and effort demonstrated by players, coaches, and staff off the field. From volunteering at local afterschool programs to honoring our military, members of the Oregon Ducks football team have shown dedication and commitment to their school and their community.

Special recognition should go to head coach Mark Helfrich—a native Oregonian—for leading this group of young men to success on and off the field. I am also proud to honor Oregon quarterback Marcus Mariota for winning the University of Oregon's first Heisman Trophy. Marcus is the first athlete of Polynesian descent to win this award, which makes him the pride of his home State of Hawaii. His acceptance speech during the Heisman Trophy presentation was truly moving. I am proud to watch him represent the University with such class.

The Oregon Ducks have seen tremendous success throughout this 2014 season, scoring an average of 45.4 points per game, 90 total touchdowns, and amassing more than 3,000 total yards rushing. Marcus Mariota set a school record for single-season passing yards—more than 4,400 yards in 15 games—and, following completion of the regular season, two members of the Oregon football team were honored as first-team All-Americans by the Associated Press.

It has been a remarkable season all around, and I look forward to more years watching Coach Helfrich encourage his players to win the day. Go Ducks!•

REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE UNION DELIVERED TO A JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS ON JANUARY 20, 2015—PM 1

The PRESIDING OFFICER laid before the Senate the following message from the President of the United States which was ordered to lie on the table:

To the Congress of the United States:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, Members of Congress, my fellow Americans:

We are 15 years into this new century. Fifteen years that dawned with terror touching our shores; that unfolded with a new generation fighting two long and costly wars; that saw a vicious recession spread across our Nation and the world. It has been, and still is, a hard time for many.

But tonight, we turn the page.

Tonight, after a breakthrough year for America, our economy is growing and creating jobs at the fastest pace since 1999. Our unemployment rate is now lower than it was before the financial crisis. More of our kids are graduating than ever before; more of our people are insured than ever before; we are as free from the grip of foreign oil as we've been in almost 30 years.

Tonight, for the first time since 9/11, our combat mission in Afghanistan is

over. Six years ago, nearly 180,000 American troops served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, fewer than 15,000 remain. And we salute the courage and sacrifice of every man and woman in this 9/11 Generation who has served to keep us safe. We are humbled and grateful for your service.

America, for all that we've endured; for all the grit and hard work required to come back; for all the tasks that lie ahead, know this:

The shadow of crisis has passed, and the state of the Union is strong.

At this moment—with a growing economy, shrinking deficits, bustling industry, and booming energy production—we have risen from recession freer to write our own future than any other nation on Earth. It's now up to us to choose who we want to be over the next 15 years, and for decades to come.

Will we accept an economy where only a few of us do spectacularly well? Or will we commit ourselves to an economy that generates rising incomes and chances for everyone who makes the effort?

Will we approach the world fearful and reactive, dragged into costly conflicts that strain our military and set back our standing? Or will we lead wisely, using all elements of our power to defeat new threats and protect our planet?

Will we allow ourselves to be sorted into factions and turned against one another—or will we recapture the sense of common purpose that has always propelled America forward?

In two weeks, I will send this Congress a budget filled with ideas that are practical, not partisan. And in the months ahead, I'll crisscross the country making a case for those ideas.

So tonight, I want to focus less on a checklist of proposals, and focus more on the values at stake in the choices before us.

It begins with our economy.

Seven years ago, Rebekah and Ben Erler of Minneapolis were newlyweds. She waited tables. He worked construction. Their first child, Jack, was on the way.

They were young and in love in America, and it doesn't get much better than that.

"If only we had known," Rebekah wrote to me last spring, "what was about to happen to the housing and construction market."

As the crisis worsened, Ben's business dried up, so he took what jobs he could find, even if they kept him on the road for long stretches of time. Rebekah took out student loans, enrolled in community college, and retrained for a new career. They sacrificed for each other. And slowly, it paid off. They bought their first home. They had a second son, Henry. Rebekah got a better job, and then a raise. Ben is back in construction—and home for dinner every night.

"It is amazing," Rebekah wrote, "what you can bounce back from when

you have to . . . we are a strong, tight-knit family who has made it through some very, very hard times."

We are a strong, tight-knit family who has made it through some very, very hard times.

America, Rebekah and Ben's story is our story. They represent the millions who have worked hard, and scrimped, and sacrificed, and retooled. You are the reason I ran for this office. You're the people I was thinking of 6 years ago today, in the darkest months of the crisis, when I stood on the steps of this Capitol and promised we would rebuild our economy on a new foundation. And it's been your effort and resilience that has made it possible for our country to emerge stronger.

We believed we could reverse the tide of outsourcing, and draw new jobs to our shores. And over the past 5 years, our businesses have created more than 11 million new jobs.

We believed we could reduce our dependence on foreign oil and protect our planet. And today, America is number one in oil and gas. America is number one in wind power. Every three weeks, we bring online as much solar power as we did in all of 2008. And thanks to lower gas prices and higher fuel standards, the typical family this year should save \$750 at the pump.

We believed we could prepare our kids for a more competitive world. And today, our younger students have earned the highest math and reading scores on record. Our high school graduation rate has hit an all-time high. And more Americans finish college than ever before.

We believed that sensible regulations could prevent another crisis, shield families from ruin, and encourage fair competition. Today, we have new tools to stop taxpayer-funded bailouts, and a new consumer watchdog to protect us from predatory lending and abusive credit card practices. And in the past year alone, about ten million uninsured Americans finally gained the security of health coverage.

At every step, we were told our goals were misguided or too ambitious; that we would crush jobs and explode deficits. Instead, we've seen the fastest economic growth in over a decade, our deficits cut by two-thirds, a stock market that has doubled, and health care inflation at its lowest rate in 50 years.

So the verdict is clear. Middle-class economics works. Expanding opportunity works. And these policies will continue to work, as long as politics don't get in the way. We can't slow down businesses or put our economy at risk with Government shutdowns or fiscal showdowns. We can't put the security of families at risk by taking away their health insurance, or unraveling the new rules on Wall Street, or refighting past battles on immigration when we've got a system to fix. And if a bill comes to my desk that tries to do any of these things, it will earn my veto.

Today, thanks to a growing economy, the recovery is touching more and