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DEAR FRIEND.....

OUTRAGEOUS

The Kochs to spend \$889 million on the 2016 Election Cycle



Inline image 1

The Koch brothers' operation intends to spend \$889 million in the run-up to the 2016 elections — a historic sum that in many ways would mark Charles and David Koch and their fellow conservative megadonors as more powerful than the official Republican Party. The figure, which more than doubles the total amount spent by the Republican National Committee during the last presidential election cycle, prompted cheers from some in the GOP who are looking for all the help they can get headed into a potentially tough 2016 election landscape.

What Do the Koch Brothers Want? According to Forbes Magazine, the Koch brothers are now worth \$80 billion, and have increased their wealth by \$12 billion since last year alone. For the Koch brothers, \$80 billion in wealth, apparently, is not good enough. Owning the second largest private company in America is, apparently, not good enough. It doesn't appear that they will be satisfied until they are able to control the entire political process from the Presidency on down. Let's be honest people don't spend almost one billion dollars without expecting. In 1980, David Koch ran as the Libertarian Party's vice-presidential candidate in 1980. Let's take a look at the 1980 Libertarian Party platform.

Here are just a few excerpts of the Libertarian Party platform that David Koch ran on in 1980:

- “We urge the repeal of federal campaign finance laws, and the immediate abolition of the despotic Federal Election Commission.”
- “We favor the abolition of Medicare and Medicaid programs.”
- “We oppose any compulsory insurance or tax-supported plan to provide health services, including those which finance abortion services.”
- “We also favor the deregulation of the medical insurance industry.”
- “We favor the repeal of the fraudulent, virtually bankrupt, and increasingly oppressive Social Security system. Pending that repeal, participation in Social Security should be made voluntary.”
- “We propose the abolition of the governmental Postal Service. The present system, in addition to being inefficient, encourages governmental surveillance of private correspondence. Pending abolition, we call for an end to the monopoly system and for allowing free competition in all aspects of postal service.”

- “We oppose all personal and corporate income taxation, including capital gains taxes.”
- “We support the eventual repeal of all taxation.”
- “As an interim measure, all criminal and civil sanctions against tax evasion should be terminated immediately.”
- “We support repeal of all law which impede the ability of any person to find employment, such as minimum wage laws.”
- “We advocate the complete separation of education and State. Government schools lead to the indoctrination of children and interfere with the free choice of individuals. Government ownership, operation, regulation, and subsidy of schools and colleges should be ended.”
- “We condemn compulsory education laws ... and we call for the immediate repeal of such laws.”
- “We support the repeal of all taxes on the income or property of private schools, whether profit or non-profit.”
- “We support the abolition of the Environmental Protection Agency.”
- “We support abolition of the Department of Energy.”
- “We call for the dissolution of all government agencies concerned with transportation, including the Department of Transportation.”
- “We demand the return of America's railroad system to private ownership. We call for the privatization of the public roads and national highway system.”
- “We specifically oppose laws requiring an individual to buy or use so-called "self-protection" equipment such as safety belts, air bags, or crash helmets.”
- “We advocate the abolition of the Federal Aviation Administration.”
- “We advocate the abolition of the Food and Drug Administration.”
- “We support an end to all subsidies for child-bearing built into our present laws, including all welfare plans and the provision of tax-supported services for children.”
- “We oppose all government welfare, relief projects, and ‘aid to the poor’ programs. All these government programs are privacy-invading, paternalistic, demeaning, and inefficient. The proper source of help for such persons is the voluntary efforts of private groups and individuals.”
- “We call for the privatization of the inland waterways, and of the distribution system that brings water to industry, agriculture and households.”
- “We call for the repeal of the Occupational Safety and Health Act.”
- “We call for the abolition of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.”
- “We support the repeal of all state usury laws.”

In other words, the agenda of the Koch brothers is not only to defund Obamacare. The agenda of the Koch brothers is to repeal every major piece of legislation that has been signed into law over the past 80 years that has protected the middle class, the elderly, the children, the sick, and the most vulnerable in this country. It is clear that the Koch brothers and other right wing billionaires are calling the shots and are pulling the strings of the Republican Party. And because of the disastrous Citizens United Supreme Court decision, they now have the power to spend an unlimited amount of money to buy the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the next President of the United States.

If they are allowed to hijack the American political process to defund Obamacare they will be back for more. Tomorrow it will be Social Security, ending Medicare as we know it, repealing the minimum wage. It seems to me that the Koch brothers will not be content until they get everything they believe they are entitled to. We can't allow our country to be hijacked by anyone right or left. And for the sake of our children and grandchildren, for the sake of our economy, we have to make sure that the Kochs and their moneyed interests fail.

How Did Applying For College Become Such A Nightmare?



As someone who is currently witnessing the nightmare of a seventeen year old high school senior applying to colleges I was drawn to Amanda Scherker's article – ***How Did Applying For College Become Such A Nightmare?*** – in the **Huffington Post**. I remember back in the 1960s when applying to a college was relatively low-key. And as someone who attended both Hunter College and New York University and was offered the opportunity to study at UMass in Amherst and Cal Arts in Southern California even though I didn't have a high diploma, I can assure you that the process was not the painstakingly brutal one that it is today. It use to not be this way. And if you were rich getting into college was often a call to the right person. And even if you weren't rich the process was still fairly simple and often you only felt the need to apply to one or two colleges. However today, I see upper-middle-class kids with good grades applying eight, ten and twelve colleges and stressing that they

might only get into their safety-net schools. How did getting into college become more difficult than opening night at Studio 54?

Because if you were an 18-year-old in the 1800s, getting into college was as easy as streaming *"Orange Is The New Black"* on Netflix today. In *The Atlantic*, Julia Ryans describes the process of getting into schools like Tufts University. She explains that in the 19th century, if you could afford the \$200 down payment (*about \$5,000 by today's standards*) and had graduated from a top high school, you would have been accepted. At worst, you had to take an entrance exam. If you passed, you were in. If you didn't attend an elite high school, no worries: Ryan says that all you would have to do is take a pretty simple entrance exam, pay the down payment and show *"good moral character."* And at most universities, the process remained fairly simple through the first decades of the 20th century.

Here's a sample application from Elon College from 1922, found by an archivist at the college who posted on Reddit:

 Inline image 2

A five dollar down payment, and you were already reserving a dorm room! As John Thelin, University of Kentucky professor and author of *"A History of Higher Education"* tells *The Chronicle*, *"Most colleges would essentially admit any applicant who could reasonably do the work, especially if they could pay."* The admissions process began to change when *"undesirable"* students started passing those entrance exams.

College officials at Harvard, Yale and Princeton in the early '20s were shocked as immigrants, particularly Jews, started making up larger and larger proportions of their student body, according to Jerome Karabel's book, *"The Chosen."* Some administrators even referred to the trend as the *"Jewish invasion,"* according to NYU professor Harold Weschler. One Harvard president wanted to impose a quota on Jewish students -- but instead, schools found more subtle ways to handpick their student bodies. Over the next decades, elite college admissions redefined "merit" to include subjective personal qualities.

Karabel says that throughout the '20s, *"An entirely new system of admissions was invented, with emphasis on such things as character, leadership, personality, alumni parentage, athletic ability, geographical diversity. They started, for the first time, to do interviews."* According to Karabel, the purpose of these policies was to subtly reduce the number of minority students.

Over the next few decades, colleges started emphasizing *"subjective character,"* that was determined from interviews with applicants. These interviews screened students for qualities like being well-dressed, well-spoken and generally likable. In his book, Karabel describes how these standards favored wealthy students. These standards for applicants maintained college as a place for the wealthy elite, typically white man.

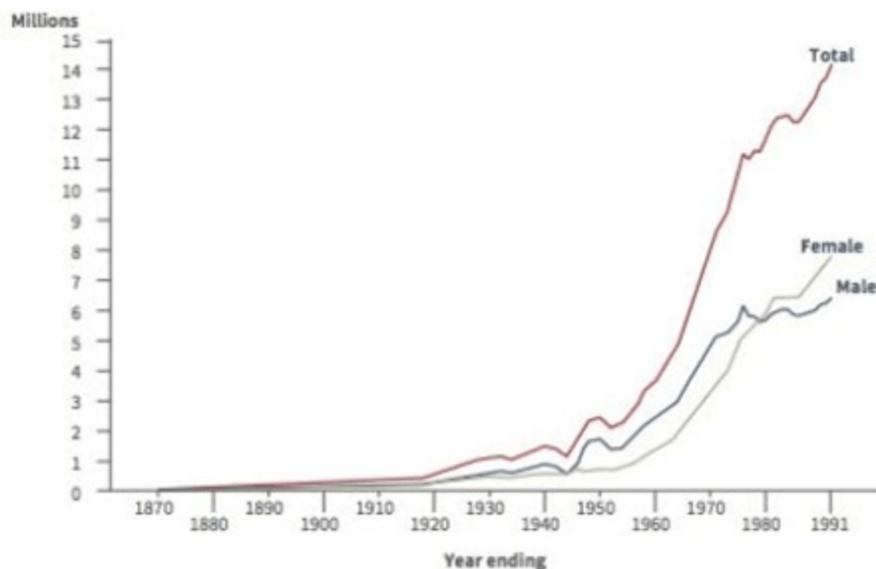


Total Ivy League material

In the '50s, applicants who exuded "manliness" were favored. According to Karabel, one student, described as academically "mediocre," was admitted *because "we just thought he was more of a guy."* Karabel says the "manliness" quota purposely excluded applicants who were suspected to be gay. Sometimes, admission details were comically superficial. Karabel says that he found notes on one rejected student that read, "Short with big ears."

But as the social movements of the '60s and '70s transformed America, colleges finally started recruiting more diverse student bodies. Karabel tells Bloomberg that the brave activism, and the social turbulence, of the Civil Rights Movement pressured colleges to admit more diverse student bodies. For example, from 1968 to 1969, Karabel says, the number of black students at Ivy League colleges doubled. Many schools started using affirmative action to reverse the racial biases that had always dominated American colleges. Over the next few decades, the population of college students soared:

Figure 1. College Enrollment 1870 to 1991



Source: U.S. Census data compiled in "120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait" page 65, figure 14.

The number of coveted "*Ivy League*" schools stayed the same, schools just had more applicants to chose from. To make the application process easier, 15 private colleges started using the Common App in 1975. Hundreds of schools would adopt the Common App over the next few decades. The Common App kept many of the "*subjective*" ideals of the past, like leadership positions and personality -- but these factors were used to make colleges more inclusive to a wide variety of students. Thanks to increased government financial aid, more students than ever were able to go to college. Growing media frenzy surrounding top colleges only made them more competitive.

U.S. News & World Report released the first "**Best Colleges**" rankings in 1983. Colleges with high rankings became even more competitive: By the late '80s, elite schools were rejecting students with perfect GPAs and test scores in the 98 percentile. As more students gained access to college, schools had to sift through many more applications -- and students had to do more to stand out. Some schools started using "*quirkier*" questions to attract their ideal student personality. In the '80s, the University of Pennsylvania popularized this approach with a prompt that offered the hypothetical: "*You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit Page 217.*" Other colleges followed suit, most famously, the University of Chicago, which in 2002, asked "*How do you feel about Wednesday?*"

Today, college admissions are more diverse and more competitive than ever. More students are applying to more schools than ever before, thanks in large part to the convenience of online admissions, but more importantly because a four year degree is often a requirement for most non-menial entry level jobs. As a result, a whole industry has cropped up to help students battle the competition, including the multimillion dollar test prep industry which fees can often exceed \$5000.

And while colleges are more diverse than ever before, the intense requirements to be admitted still puts some students at a major advantage. As a result, students from wealthy backgrounds are far more likely to get into a top college. While our media culture remains obsessed with the "*Ivy League*," getting in is more of a crapshoot than ever before. But remember: you can become a major league success --without going to an Ivy League school. And as I try to explain to my own children and those of my friends a college education and degree is essential if they hope to prosper and live as well as their parents.

What's So Bad About Cheap Oil?



Inline image 1

Pumping oil near Williston, ■■■, in March 2013. Low oil prices are bad news for boomtowns like Williston but could be a windfall for the overall American economy.

I was taken aback recently when I read the heading of an article in the **New York Times** by Gretchen Morgenson – ***What’s So Bad About Cheap Oil?*** – When the obvious answer is..... NOTHING..... Because the sharp drop in oil prices is benefiting American consumers, many of the nation’s businesses and the economy as a whole. So as Morgenson asks, why are stock market investors behaving as though oil under \$50 a barrel and gasoline prices hovering around \$2 a gallon are bad news? We understand that the overall market’s recent decline reflects more than just the free fall in oil prices, as overseas economies are struggling; last week, the World Bank cut its forecast for global growth to 3 percent from 3.4 percent. But fears about losses emanating from a devastated oil patch have weighed heavily on broad stock indexes, investment strategists say. This response appears to be a case of investors seizing on the industry’s highly visible losers while ignoring the far larger number of winners. *“The stock market has reacted negatively, and some of that comes down to the fact that you can see what the impact is on large energy firms,”* said Paul Ashworth, chief North American economist at Capital Economics in Toronto. *“It’s harder initially to see the positive impact that spreads around the rest of the economy. The big benefit to consumers is not as noticeable.”*

Since the beginning of 2015, the broad market averages have lost roughly 2 percent of their value. The collapse in oil company shares, of course, has been far greater. The Standard & Poor’s index of 80 oil and gas exploration companies is down 11.14 percent in 2015 and 35.4 percent over the last 52 weeks. The ■■■ index of six large oil services companies has fallen 5.2 percent so far this year, and 12.4 percent over the last year. Both indexes reflect the undeniable pain that oil and gas producers, their investors, suppliers, service providers, workers and lenders are going to feel. Layoff announcements, disclosures of capital spending cuts and falling rig counts are all highly visible to investors. So are anecdotal tales of woe from former boomtowns in North Dakota. Less conspicuous, however, are the winners in a world of cheaper oil, economists say. The good news is, they far outnumber the losers.

David R. Kotok, chief investment officer at Cumberland Advisors in Sarasota, Fla., estimates that the economic output among oil companies and related businesses could decline by as much as \$150 billion this year because of the oil price collapse. But an increase of about \$400 billion is expected in other areas of the economy, he said. The net effect is double the annual value of the two percentage point payroll tax cut in 2011 and 2012, which provided a big increase to consumer spending. *“The market’s first reaction to almost any shock is not to like it because it raises the uncertainty premium,”* Mr.

Kotok said. *“Meanwhile, the beneficial effects happen over a longer period, when the change is perceived and anticipated to become more permanent. The difference between temporary and permanent may explain the behavior of the markets here.”*

Morgenson’s article suggest that investors are operating in an information vacuum: They don’t yet have clarity on the full effects of under-\$50 oil. News items about companies mothballing projects that are no longer economically viable have been common: Last week, for example, Royal Dutch Shell canceled a \$6.5 billion petrochemical plant deal it struck with Qatar Petroleum in 2011. Still, few of the major oil companies — which must plan over a long time horizon, building in expectations that prices will eventually rebound — have disclosed their spending plans for 2015. One that has, ConocoPhillips, says it plans to invest \$13.5 billion, a 20 percent drop from 2014. Much of that decline resulted from lower expenditures on unconventional energy projects, the company said.

Another wild card in assessing the impact of the oil decline is the shale oil industry. Because the economics of horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing are not the same as those of traditional wells, it is unclear how investment and production in this industry will be affected by the price decline. Andrew Hunter at Capital Economics in London noted in an analysis last week that many shale projects had short-term variable operating costs as low as \$20 a barrel. Production in such projects won’t necessarily be stopped just because oil prices have fallen to \$45 a barrel, he concluded. Of course, a sizable reduction in the industry’s capital spending and the number of workers it employs is certainly coming. Total employment in the oil industry — including oil and gas extraction and support services — averaged 528,000 in 2014, according to Rigzone, an industry data provider. *“My guess is that in 2014, energy companies spent over \$200 billion, mostly on structures but also on equipment,”* said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics. He now expects that figure to fall by half or more.

That’s not pocket change, but capital spending cuts will be small when set against the overall \$17 trillion size of our economy. And even if the industry lost half its jobs — which it won’t — that would be equivalent to less than a single month’s gain for the overall economy, which added about 275,000 jobs a month last year. *“That completely dwarfs any hits in the oil business, capital spending and oil services business,”* Mr. Shepherdson said. But it seems that investors also seem to be ignoring the benefits of lower-cost oil to small businesses. In December, as the oil price was dropping, the National Federation of Independent Business’s optimism index returned to its prerecession average and rose to the highest point since October 2006. Owners of these businesses say they are increasing their capital expenditures this year. The [REDACTED]’s most recent quarterly survey showed capital spending among these businesses rising to a seven-year high. This, too, will help offset the drop in oil and gas expenditures.

The overall economic benefits of the collapse in oil prices are significant, Mr. Shepherdson said. He The reality is that the oil business and everything to do with it is a very small share of the economy, most likely less than 5% of the GDP, so paraphrasing Morgenson again, why isn’t the other 95% of the economy is saying, *“Thank you very much,”* because the overall economic benefits of the collapse in oil prices are significant, especially when economist are predicting that it could add almost one percentage point to real gross domestic product growth in the United States this year. In an economy trending at 2.25 percent annual growth, that’s a sizable gain.

U.S. Standard of Living Index Climbs to Highest in 7 Years



The Trend Line: U.S. Economic and Standard of Living Indexes Reach New Highs.

Web site: <http://youtu.be/JyTY6OztfQI>

Story Highlights

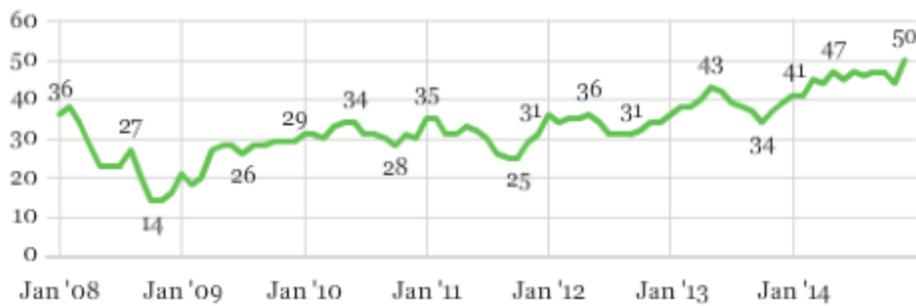
- *Index reaches new high of +50*
- *Record 81% of Americans satisfied with standard of living*
- *Sixty-one percent say standard of living is "getting better"*

WASHINGTON, ■■■. -- Gallup's Standard of Living Index reached a new high of +50 in December, the best score found in seven years of tracking the index. Americans' improved perspective on their personal standard of living comes as they spend more money and begin to view the national economy positively.

Gallup U.S. Standard of Living Index, Monthly Averages

Right now, do you feel your standard of living is getting better or getting worse?

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your standard of living, all the things you can buy and do?



Gallup Daily tracking

The Standard of Living Index is based on a composite of the two questions.

GALLUP

The index has labored through a long recovery from its recession-era slump, with lows of +14 in both October and November of 2008, when the global economic crisis erupted. But the latest ratings exceed even pre-crisis levels in 2008, illustrating a remarkable turnaround in how Americans view their standard of living.

The year 2014 started off with better standard of living readings than practically all other monthly readings before, with a +41 in January and February. From March to November, it improved further, but remained in a narrow range of +44 to +47. The +50 rating for December brings the index to an unprecedented level in its seven-year trend.

Gallup's Standard of Living Index is a composite of Americans' responses to two questions: one asking whether they are satisfied with their current standard of living, and the other asking whether their standard of living is getting better or worse. The index has a theoretical maximum of 100 (if all respondents say they are satisfied with their standard of living and say it is getting better) and a theoretical minimum of -100 (if all respondents are dissatisfied with their standard of living and say it is getting worse). The current score of +50 indicates Americans are quite positive about their standard of living, but even at its lows in the fall of 2008, Americans evaluated their standard of living positively overall.

Both dimensions of the index have improved by roughly five points over the past year - however, since the nadir of these perceptions in 2008, people's outlook for their standard of living going forward has improved much more than their current satisfaction with it.

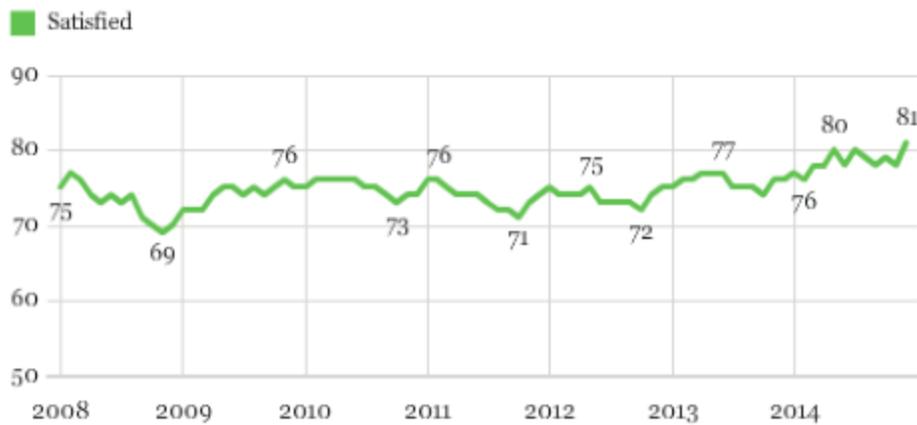
Four in Five Americans Satisfied with Their Current Standard of Living

A consistent majority of Americans have expressed satisfaction with their standard of living over the past seven years, ranging from 69% in late 2008 to 81% today. However, after fluctuating in an even

narrower seven-point range from 2009 through 2013, it rose from 76% at the end of 2013 to 81% at the end of 2014.

Americans' Satisfaction With Their Current Standard of Living

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your standard of living, all the things you can buy and do?



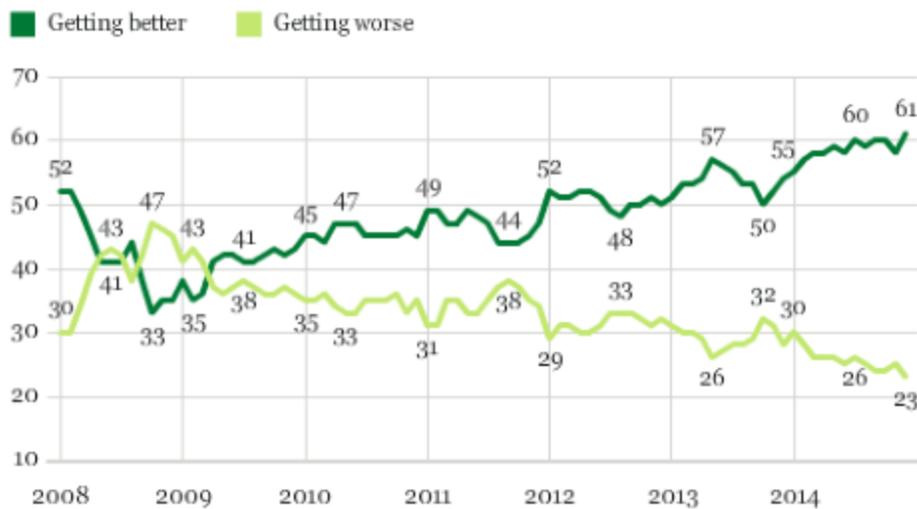
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While Americans are becoming more satisfied with their current standard of living, they are also becoming more optimistic about its future. Sixty-one percent of Americans now say their standard of living is "getting better" -- a new high, and nearly twice the level it was at its low of 33% in October 2008.

Less than a quarter of Americans (23%) say their standard of living is "getting worse."

Americans' Future Expectations for Their Standard of Living

Right now, do you feel your standard of living is getting better or getting worse?



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Bottom Line

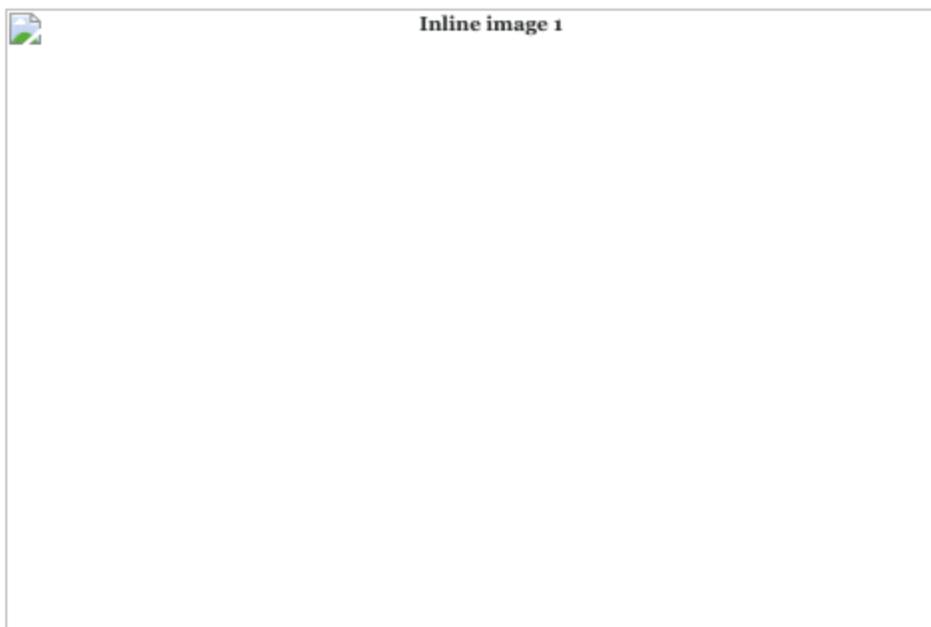
Though most Americans' personal financial situation probably doesn't change dramatically from one year to the next, an improving economy and soaring stock market likely help them feel better about

their own situation. To some degree, this is evident in reports from Gallup's daily tracking data of increased spending. The question defines standard of living as "all the things [they] can buy and do," so perhaps lower gas prices are freeing up dollars for Americans to spend on discretionary items.

While both political parties clamor for the credit of this post-recession glow, where the index will be heading from here is better to focus on. Because how Americans view their standard of living can crumple just as quickly as the economy.

“This is Good News, People....”

President Obama



With those five words, President Obama made clear that he thinks it's far more important to win a long-term argument with his partisan and ideological opponents than to pretend that they are eager to seize opportunities to work with him. He decided to deal with the Republican Party he has, not the Republican Party he wishes he had.

E.J. Dionne – The Washington Post – January 22, 2015

I waited a week before commenting on the President's **State of the Union Address** last week as I wanted to digest and see how the Republican opposition responds beyond their initial dismissals and denials. In his sixth State-of-the-Union address, Barack Obama argued for "*Middle-Class economics*": tax credits for child care, free community college, paid sick leave, increased infrastructure spending and a higher minimum wage. His other requests to Congress included lifting the embargo on Cuba and authorizing the use of force against Islamic State. More than anything, the President signaled a fresh battle for the hearts and minds of America's beleaguered Middle Class -- Yet Republicans aren't having any of it. The party of Tax Cuts, Tax Cuts, Tax Cuts..... have even vowed to fight the President's proposed tax cuts for the Middle Class. Obama mentioned the Middle Class at least seven times and touted "*working*" people at least nine as he rolled out proposals to offer new child tax credits, raise the minimum wage, extend paid family leave and make college more affordable. He mentioned "*families*" 16 times. But well before Obama's speech was over, House Speaker John Boehner's (*R-Ohio*) office

was firing off responses, declaring that Obama's "*regulatory onslaught squeezes the very middle-class families he claims to be trying to help*," and that he was threatening to veto what Republicans consider to be jobs bills.

The one thing that most likely will be remembered from this State of the Union Address is the President's proposal for making Community Colleges free. To which many Republicans immediately dismissed as too expensive and asked "*how does he intends to pay for it.*" Obviously none of these people remember that the GI Bill was passed unanimously in 1944 and no asked "*how was it going to be paid for*" because the politicians on both sides of the aisle because understood that this is an investment in the future of the country and we needed to do this to have a strong nation. This is especially true today when we are being told that within five years an associated agree or its equitant will be required for more than 50% of the entry level jobs. Indeed, the unemployment rate confirms that tracking, almost exactly to education.

Those without a high school degree, for example, had an 11 percent unemployment rate in 2013. Those with BAs, meanwhile, had just a 4 percent unemployment rate. It's not only that people with good educations have an easier time getting a job. They also earn relatively more than ever before — and those with poor educations, much less. As shown in the lower portion of the chart, back in 1975, those with lesser educations had earnings of about 84 percent of national mean incomes. Today, that figure has dropped to 66 percent. It's not just that those with lesser skills are making less. The college-educated are now making more. In 1975, for instance, employees with some post-secondary education earned about \$1.55 for every \$1 earned by those with only a high school education or less. In 2012, that figure had climbed to \$1.80. Much of the blame for these changes goes to technology: Many lower-skilled jobs have disappeared, replaced by machines, while at the same time those with higher levels of education are able to command better salaries because technology (such as computers) allows them to be more productive. And as a result of internationalization labor has become a commodity which can easily be outsourced.

One of the coolest things for supporters of the President is that he has recaptured *his mojo*, the swagger that got his elected. Starting with how he was able to roll off his many accomplishments that are results of his policies that both Republicans and Democrats often questioned:

PRESIDENT OBAMA: "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.

And over the past five 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 fifty 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 more lives. Wages are finally starting to rise again. We know that more small business owners plan to raise their employees' pay than at any time since 2007. But here's the thing—those of us here tonight, we need to set our sights higher than just making sure government doesn't halt the progress we're making. We need to do more than just do no harm. Tonight, together, let's do more to restore the link between hard work and growing opportunity for every American.”

How can you argue against this? In the age of the microwave, the President took a long-term view which has resulted in significant gains. Yet, in the GOP response to the address, freshman Sen. Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) suggested that the president has harmed regular people. *"The new Republican Congress also understands how difficult these past six years have been,"* said Ernst, who first attracted attention by promising to make Washington insiders squeal like the hogs she used to castrate on a farm. *"For many of us, the sting of the economy and the frustration with Washington's dysfunction weren't things we had to read about. We felt them every day."*

It is funny to see Republican after Republican say that the biggest failure in America is *economic inequality* because Liberals and Progressives have been saying this same thing for years. And although the President had a consolatory tone toward the Republicans, many suggested that they were disappointed, suggesting that it was just another speech. Such sentiments were echoed widely by Republicans leaving the address, who pointed to people's struggles as evidence that the GOP's agenda will better serve most Americans.

"If you look at middle-class families who have lost income over the past several years, if you look at Colorado families where median income has declined ... that is not a stronger place than it was, and not a stronger place than it needs to be," said Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.).

"You know, I was disappointed. I was disappointed that I didn't hear more from the president as far as how we were going to help those middle-class families," said Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.), the top woman in the GOP leadership. *"I thought he painted a little rosy picture of how things are, at a time when people continue to see their wages actually shrink, take-home pay shrinking. Job opportunities are not enough."*

But the tone of the GOP's response highlighted a difficult fact to deal with in the two years before the next presidential election: Republicans are making an argument that is mostly negative, leaving Obama and Democrats to strike a more positive tone as unemployment continues to fall and hiring improves. Asked for three highlights in the president's speech, Rep. Steve Israel (D-█) said: *"Middle class, middle class and middle class."* And asked if Republicans would be legislative partners on most of the issues Obama raised, Israel responded, *"No, no and no."*

As a result of the buildup to President Obama's State of the Union address made it sound as if he was going to read chapter and verse from French economist Thomas Piketty's book, ***Capital in the 21st Century*** – last year's 700-plus page best seller, the one that was unexpectedly all the rage as it argued that vast economic inequality is as much about wealth (what's owned) as it is about income (what's earned) a number of Progressives were disappointed with the President because he only mentioned Economic Inequality once in the hour long address... Matt Schiavenza explained Piketty's thesis in ***The Atlantic***, *"Applying data gathered across several decades throughout the world, Piketty argued that when income derived from capital exceeds income derived from work, inequality necessarily widens. Or, in non-economics speak: The easiest way to get rich isn't to make a lot of money. It's to have a lot of assets in the first place. Better yet to inherit it."*

As a result not that anyone really expected the president to address Congress like a tutorial in global economics, but the Piketty meme took hold in a lot of the media. *"Echoes of Piketty in Obama Proposal to Address Income Inequality"* read a headline in ***The New York Times*** previewing the address just hours before it was delivered. ***The Washington Post's Wonkblog*** predicted, *"President Obama finally has his Piketty moment."* The paper's Matt O'Brien wrote, *"The state of the*

union is pretty good, actually, but President Obama has an idea to make it better: taxing Wall Street and the super-rich to make middle-class work even more worthwhile. It's Piketty with an American accent."

In fact, the president only used the word "inequality" only once in his entire, hour-long speech: "Let's close the loopholes that lead to inequality by allowing the top one percent to avoid paying taxes on their accumulated wealth," he said. "We can use that money to help more families pay for childcare and send their kids to college. We need a tax code that truly helps working Americans trying to get a leg up in the new economy, and we can achieve that together."

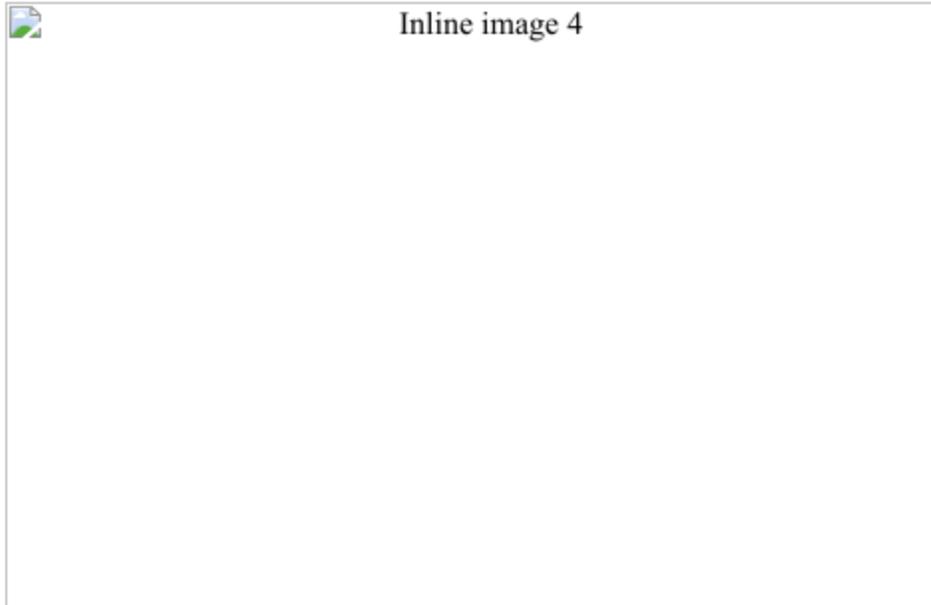
Administration officials said much of the \$320 billion in new taxes and fees would be used for measures aimed at helping the middle class, including a \$500 tax credit for some families with two spouses working and a \$60 billion program to make community college free. This is, as several commentators have described it, "Piketty-lite," a start, but not enough to get the job done for a middle class clobbered by technology and globalization. "Dollar-store progressivism," Jordan Weissman calls it at **Slate**. "... Big ideas with relatively small price tags." That \$320 billion is spread out over a decade, or \$32 billion per year: "That's just a smidge more than 1 percent of last year's federal tax revenue—more than a rounding error, but not much more. Obama isn't looking to soak the rich at this point so much as lightly spritz them."

As E. J. Dionne pointed out – "President Obama made clear that he thinks it's far more important to win a long-term argument with his partisan and ideological opponents than to pretend that they are eager to seize opportunities to work with him. He decided to deal with the Republican Party he has, not the Republican Party he wishes he had. There is something odd in the notion that Obama is supposed to abandon his convictions because the Republicans won a low-turnout midterm election whose Senate races were fought mostly in territory hostile to Democrats. Ronald Reagan was never asked to stop being a conservative after Democrats took the Senate in the 1986 elections and emerged in control of both houses of Congress. Republicans praised George W. Bush for his courage in upping his commitment in Iraq through the troop surge, even though the Democratic sweep of 2006 was in large part a repudiation of the war on which he doubled down. Are only progressive presidents expected to trim their sails? There seemed to be a disconnect between Obama's combative opening and his close defending his signature refrain that "there wasn't a liberal America, or a conservative America." He acknowledged that many saw it as "ironic" that our politics seems more divided than ever."

The President Obama hit the ball out of the park as his State of the Union Address was an optimistic view of what is possible, firmly based on what has been accomplished. And for those who say this is not enough, the President has asked them to come up with their own solutions. Repealing Obamacare because it is not perfect is not an answer unless you are going to replace it with something better. I still don't understand the Republican fascination with the Keystone Pipeline because it really is a straw employing less than 50 full timers that only benefits Canada who will use it to sell their crude to other countries. But unlike many of my Progressive friends I don't have anything against it, as we already have tens of thousands of pipelines crisscrossing the country and one more really won't make that much of a difference. But for Republicans to ignore other infrastructure projects that would upgrade our bridges, roads, ports, levees, waterways, sanitation and electric grid which would create a better environment to Americans as well as millions of new jobs.... It doesn't make sense. In the State of the Union, the President outlined a realistic agenda to benefit the Middle Class and the Poor and for Republicans to repudiate it for pure partisan reasons **is my rant of the week....**

WEEK'S READINGS

The *Groovy* Imitation Bands of 1960s Japanese Rock



Web Link: [\[REDACTED\]](#)

Heavily influenced by the Beatles, Rolling Stones and American Rock & Roll, R&B and Top 40 music and psycheldelic rock, Japan had its very own *'beat era'* during the 1960s. It spawned an entirely new music genre known as **'Group Sounds'** (GS), which saw over a hundred bands release vinyl records on major labels that imitated Western rock musicians. More than often, *Group Sounds* records did covers of the supergroups such as The Beatles, The Bee Gees and The Rolling Stones, translating the lyrics into Japanese. But the colourful, outfit co-ordinated bands also recorded their own Western-inspired moody ballads and syrupy pop songs. Much of it was not so good, but some of it was interesting stuff with an added exotic edge of being sung in Japanese.



Inline image 5

The Group Sounds scene was largely contrived, commercialized, and possibly controlled to the point of absurdity. Record companies wouldn't let bands associate with other bands. The group Lind and the Linders' most successful record was called "*I Dig Rock and Roll Music*", a mildly psychedelic tribute to Donovan, the Mamas and Papas and the Beatles. Most Japanese musicians felt that they could not sing rock in Japanese. There were debates between bands over whether they should be singing in English or Japanese and the confrontation became known as the "*Japanese-language rock controversy*". It was decided that Japanese rock music should be sung in Japanese which likely spawned the origins of modern J-Pop.



Inline image 3

Those searching for authenticity had to look underground or overseas. The Jacks were seen as an outsider group in Japanese music, too original to fit under the Group Sounds moniker of the times. Their music was often slow, dramatic and morbid, and pioneered a Japanese folk-rock movement of the late '60s that was partly a reaction against *Group Sounds*. While the authorities preferred the subdued music, by 1968, the record-buying public was looking for '*authenticity*' and more complex lyrics, but as a commercial genre however, folk-rock seems to have been short-lived. It appears Jacks' peak creativity came in 1967 and early '68



Inline image 2

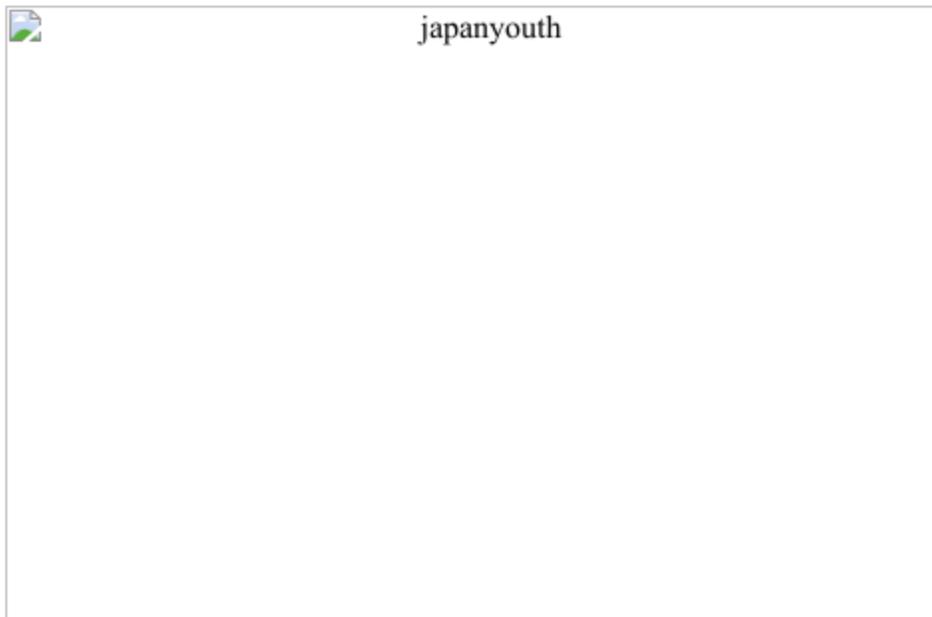
The Dynamites – ***Tunnel To Heaven*** (Tunnel Tengoku) – Web Link for the song:
<http://youtu.be/SWera-kdCvw>

The Dynamites came out of the Tokyo club scene, calling themselves the Monsters before having to change their name when they got a record deal. They had a pretty fine original number called “*Tunnel to Heaven*”, but unfortunately, like most GS bands, their LP is chock full of poorly chosen cover songs like “*My Girl*” and the Bee Gees’ “*Massachusetts*”.



And since we're in a time-traveling mood, I thought it might be interesting to see what the music and youth culture of 1960s Japan really looked like, up close and personal. This is a feature shot by photographer Michael Rougier that may or may not have made it into a 1964 special Japan issue of LIFE magazine. Rougier attended a rock gig during the height of Japan's beat era and takes us behind the colourfully contrived vinyl sleeves of Group Sounds and into the belly of the after dark music scene...

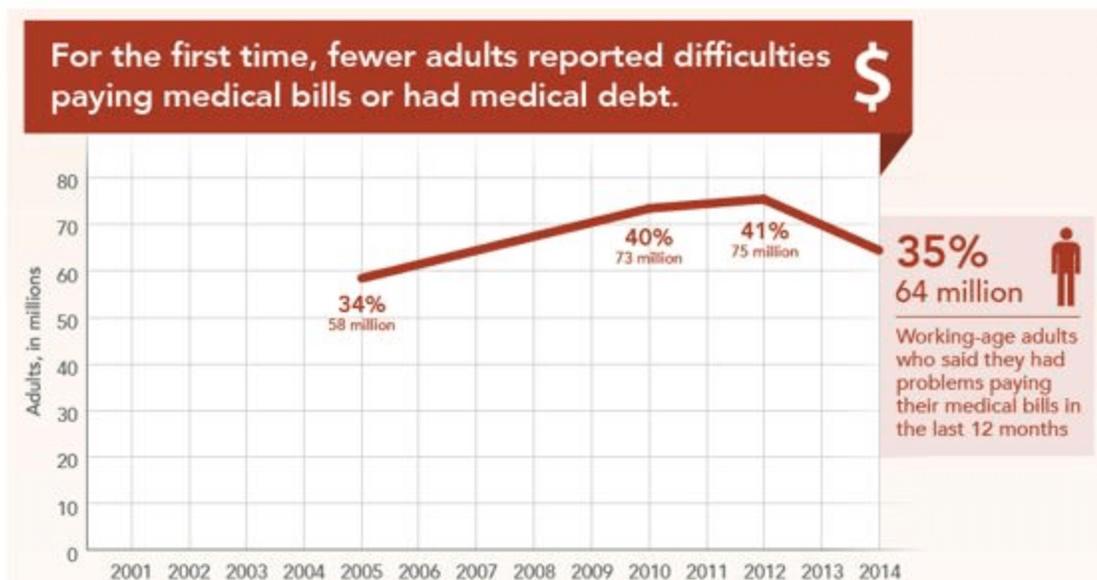
To see the entire article please click on the web link: : [groovy-imitation-bands-of-1960s-japanese-rock/](#)



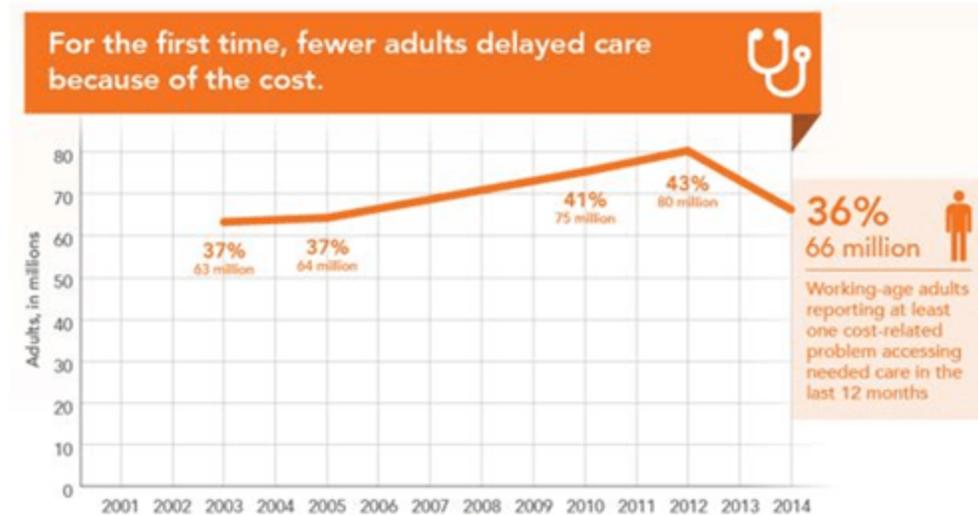
Obamacare Has Reversed A Negative Trend. Researchers Call It ‘Remarkable.’



There is more good news because for the first time in a decade, the number of people struggling to pay their medical bills has started to decline, according to a new survey released on January 15, 2015 by the **Commonwealth Fund**. The researchers attributed the historic drop to the number of people gaining insurance under the health care reform law. Between 2012 and 2014 – as Obamacare’s main coverage expansion took effect – the Commonwealth researchers found that the number of people who had issues paying for health treatment dropped from 41 percent to 35 percent. Over the same time period, the people who skipped out on health services because they couldn’t afford them declined from 43 percent to 36 percent:



In a press release, the researchers described the declines as “remarkable.” This marks the first time since 2005, when Commonwealth started surveying people on these questions that the number of Americans struggling to afford medical care hasn’t increased. “Health insurance really provides people with a financial means to get care,” Sara Collins, a vice president at the Commonwealth Fund and one of the people who worked on the study, told the **New York Times**. “We don’t know yet that the law is improving people’s health, but this is a first indication that people are affording care that they weren’t able to get in the past.”

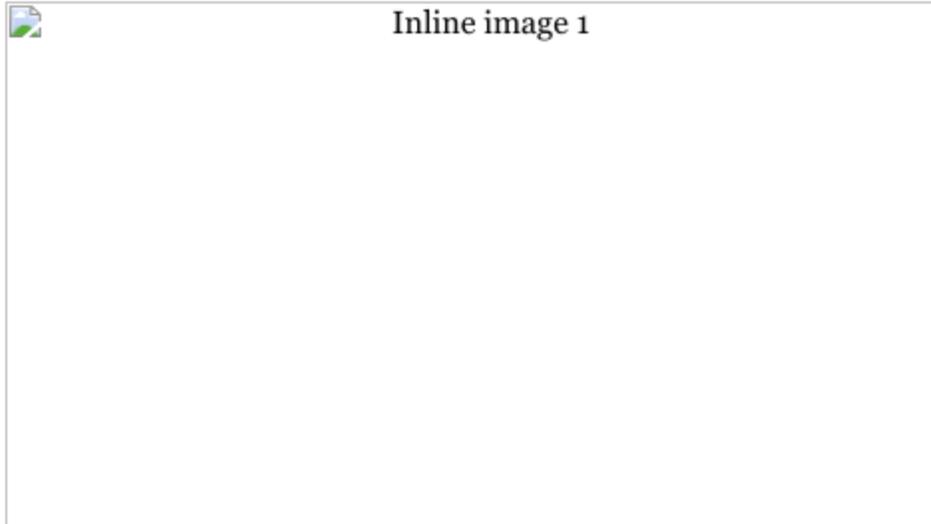


Commonwealth’s findings, which also documented a drop in the number of Americans going without insurance, track closely with other surveys that have reported declines in the uninsured rate under Obamacare. The number of Americans without health care was reduced by about 25 percent last year, which means that between eight million and eleven million people have gained coverage.

The high cost of health care remains an issue for millions of Americans; according to Commonwealth, there are still about 66 million adults who reported skipping out on care last year because they couldn’t afford it. And previous studies from the organization have documented a trend in employers pushing more health costs onto their workers, leaving some Americans struggling to pay their deductibles and co-pays. Medical debt is one of the leading causes of bankruptcy in the United States.

Still, the new report provides significant evidence that the Affordable Care Act is taking steps to tackle the problem. As the New York Times reports, “financial distress was a clear target of the health law,” and Commonwealth’s data suggests that Obamacare is moving toward this goal. That progress could be undermined, however, depending on the outcome of a pending Supreme Court case against Obamacare. *King v. Burwell* seeks to prevent the government from providing tax credits in the 37 states with federally-run marketplaces, essentially cutting off millions of people from affordable coverage under the health law. Previous analyses have calculated that, if federally-run marketplaces were no longer permitted to extend tax credits, the cost of insurance in those states would increase by an average of 76 percent. In some states, monthly premiums could jump by nearly \$400.

Watch Jon Stewart Take On 'The Monsters Of Money' At Davos



Web Link: <http://youtu.be/MXiYy6E-Pd0>

During last Thursday night's **Daily Show**, *"Jon Stewart took on the "Monsters of Money" -- the business and financial leaders who flew to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. For Jon Stewart, pointing out the irony of the world's super-rich taking 1,700 private jets to Switzerland to discuss climate change was too easy. The host began the Thursday night's episode of "The Daily Show" skewering the Davos conference, an annual meeting of the World Economic Forum where the global elite gather to pontificate on other ironic topics like inequality and regulation of the finance industry. "As in... can you believe how much climate we've changed?" Stewart wondered aloud.*

The summit, he said, is also *"a chance for the powerful to reflect on how the world has changed since the devastating financial collapse that many of them caused and/or profited from."* Stewart then went after some of the biggest names in business, including JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon and AIG's Steve Miller, both of whom have complained about the new regulations put in place since the 2008 financial crisis. But Stewart saved the best for last, blasting MetLife for suing the government over its *"too big to fail"* status. Check out the clip above to see Stewart use the insurance company's own marketing materials to prove that they are, in fact, every bit as big as the government says they are.

2014 Was The Hottest Year Since At Least 1880, Government Finds



Inline image 1

People cool themselves off in a canal in Lahore, Pakistan, where temperatures reached 46 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) on Sunday, June 8, 2014.

2014 was the hottest year in 135 years of record-keeping, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA announced on January 16, 2015. The year's average combined global land and ocean surface temperature was 58.24 degrees Fahrenheit, according to NOAA. This is 1.24 F above the 20th-century average. Global average land temperatures were 1.80 F above average, while ocean surface temperatures were 1.03 F above average, the agency said. Land temperatures alone were only the fourth-warmest on record, but ocean temperatures were the warmest, which helped to make 2014 the warmest year overall. NOAA and NASA record temperature observations independently, but both agencies confirmed 2014 to be a record-breaking year. NASA reported 2014's average temperature to be 58.42 F, which the agency reported was 1.22 F above a 1951-1980 average.

Previously, 2010 and 2005 held the record, but the 2014 temperature edged out both years by 0.07 F. The 10 warmest years on record have all been after 1998, and 2014 marked the 38th straight year with global average temperatures above the 20th-century average. Six months in 2014 also set monthly global heat records: May, June, August, September, October and December of last year were all the warmest such months on record. *"Viewed in context, the record 2014 temperatures underscore the undeniable fact that we are witnessing, before our eyes, the effects of human-caused climate change,"* climate scientist Michael. *"It is exceptionally unlikely that we would be seeing a record year, during a record-warm decade, during a multidecadal period of warmth that appears to be unrivaled over at least the past millennium, if it were not for the rising levels of planet-warming gases produced by fossil fuel burning."*

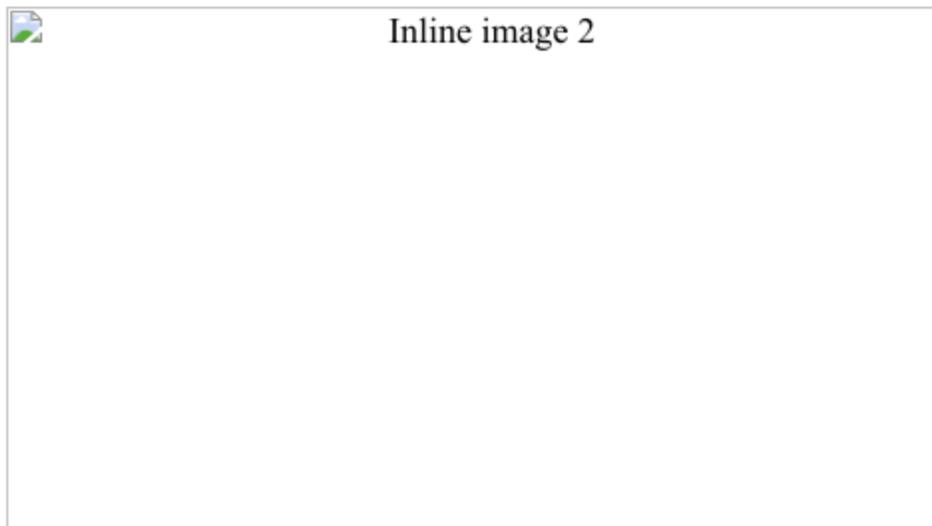
For the U.S. alone, as opposed to the planet overall, 2014 was only the 34th warmest year on record. But temperatures in the U.S. that year still exceeded the country's 20th-century average, for the 18th consecutive year. Seventeen major U.S. metropolitan areas, representing 9 percent of the country's population, were on track to have their warmest years on record, as of a December 2014 analysis from Climate Central. Ten of these 17 are located in California, one of five states that were projected to have one of their top five warmest years in 2014. *"Perhaps more important than the global temperature story are the impacts of record regional heat,"* Jonathan Overpeck, co-director of the University of Arizona's Institute of the Environment. *"In places like California, the Southwest U.S. more generally, Australia and parts of Brazil, record heat is exacerbating drought and leading to more stress on our water supplies and forests."* *"With continued global warming, we're going to see more and more of these unprecedented regional conditions, and with them will come more and more costs to humans and the things they value,"* he added. *"2014 shows that humans are indeed cooking their planet as they continue to combust fossil fuels."*

1985 was the last year that any urban area in the U.S. saw a record-cold year. February 1985 was the last time the planet saw a colder-than-average month. **"If you are younger than 29 years old, you haven't lived in a month that was cooler than the 20th-century average,"** said Marshall Shepherd, a professor at the University of Georgia and former president of the American Meteorological Society. *"You will hear some skeptics say that the satellite-based temperature records don't support these findings, but we also used ground-based instruments like thermometers and rain gauges to validate these measurements."*

The new global record is also notable because 2014 was not an El Niño year. The weather phenomenon is marked by warmer-than-average surface ocean temperatures in the equatorial Pacific and leads to above average near-surface air temperatures and other impacts across the globe. El Niño has been observed during previous record-warm years like 1998, 2005 and 2010. *"A record or near-record warm year, especially absent a strong El Niño, is mostly a reminder that the long-term trend for Earth's temperature is up, up, up,"* Princeton University geosciences professor Michael Oppenheimer.

Along with rising temperatures, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases continue to increase. Carbon dioxide concentrations surpassed 400 parts per million in May 2013, for the first time in at least 800,000 years. CO₂ concentrations rise and fall slightly in an annual cycle, but remained above 400 parts per million for several months in 2014 and have already surpassed 400 again in January 2015. The last time carbon dioxide levels were this high, temperatures were up to 11 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than today, and sea levels were dozens of feet higher. The 400 parts per million milestone is somewhat symbolic, but it serves as a reminder that the massive consumption of fossil fuels continues to remake the chemistry of our atmosphere and trap more and more heat from the sun. *"The record temperatures should put to rest the absurd notion of a "pause" (what I refer to as the "Faux Pause") in global warming,"* Mann added.

Watch a NASA animation of five-year global temperature averages, mapped from 1880 to 2014:



Web Link: <http://youtu.be/WtPkFBbJLMg>



Inline image 3

An Avocado A Day Keeps Bad Cholesterol Away



As someone who has face several serious health issues and would like to enjoy the *Back Nine* as much as the first I now take dietary tips with increase interest. As such when I ran across an article in the **Huffington Post** by Anna Almendrala – ***An Avocado A Day Keeps Bad Cholesterol Away*** – I was happy to discover that one of my favorite fruits Avocado (*which is not a vegetable*) can improve my Cholesterol Level if eaten one a day – at least in overweight (*like myself*) and obese people. As you may know avocados have gotten a bad rap in the past because they're high in calories and fat. But it's their richness in monounsaturated fat that researchers say gives avocado its ability to lower bad.....

CHOLESTEROL.

Researchers asked 45 overweight or obese participants to eat an average American diet (*51 percent of calories from carbs, 34 percent from fat and 16 percent from protein*) for two weeks to establish a common baseline for testing their CHOLESTEROL and other measurements. Then they assigned the participants to complete a series of three diets in a randomized order: a low FAT DIET (*24 percent of calories from fat*) without avocado, a moderate fat diet (*34 percent of calories from fat*) without avocado and a moderate fat diet with a daily serving of a whole avocado. Each diet lasted for five

weeks, with two-week breaks in between to control for any carryover effects. The participants were also provided with food for each phase of the study, making the meals uniform.

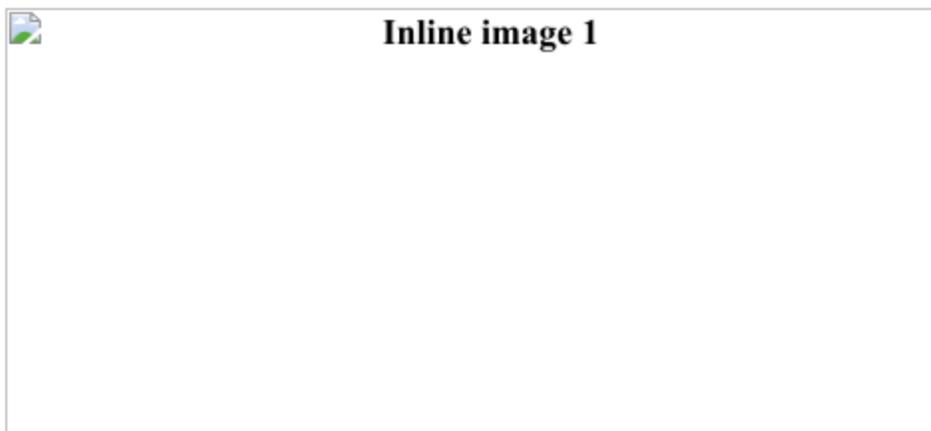
The researchers found that all regimens helped participants lower their levels of two types of cholesterol associated with cardiovascular disease risk: low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and non-high density lipoprotein (non-HDL).

It's important to note that these diets often work simply because researchers have a high level of control over participants' food choices. Nutritionist and lead author Penny M. Kris-Etherton, [REDACTED] of PENN STATE UNIVERSITY noted that readers shouldn't simply start adding an avocado to their diets, especially if it's a typical American one that takes a significant number of empty calories from grain-based desserts like cookies and cakes. That's a recipe for weight gain, according to Kris-Etherton, because an avocado has about 200 calories. If you want to incorporate avocados into your diet, try them as a substitute for JUNK food.

Because of how expensive and rare avocados can be in different parts of the country during certain times of the year, Kris-Etherton also emphasized that there are many other sources of UNSATURATED FAT in addition to avocados, like nuts, seeds and other oils. Still, her research showed that the avocado diet proved to be a better diet for cholesterol than even the moderate FAT diet, which also supplied dieters with monounsaturated fat in the form of sunflower and canola oil. Kris-Etherton is intrigued about what sets avocados apart from other sources of good fat.

"We don't know what it is. It could be the fiber, but it could be some other bioactive components in the avocado that are also in other plant foods or fruits and vegetables," she said. "Or they could be unique to avocado."

In addition to good fat, avocados are also packed with potassium (*it has almost twice as much potassium as a banana*) and have among the highest levels of proteins for a fruit. The superfood even has the ability to lessen the inflammatory properties of other foods that are eaten alongside it; a 2012 UCLA pilot study FOUND that eating a hamburger with half of an avocado significantly cut down on the production of an inflammatory compound normally associated with the consumption of red meat. When I was growing up the saying was – *"an apple a day will keep the doctor away"* – I guess that this is now also true about Avocados.



After five years of extreme austerity prescribed to treat an epidemic of debt, a battered but defiant Greece last Sunday emphatically rejected the medicine Greece's leftist Syriza party was swept into power in a historic vote, promising to end years of painful austerity policies and putting the country on a collision course with the EU and international creditors. In a result that exceeded analysts' expectations, Syriza and its 40-year-old leader Alexis Tsipras won 149 seats in the 300-seat Greek parliament, just two short of an absolute majority. The party subsequently announced that it had struck a deal with the right-wing party Greek Independents to form an anti-austerity coalition with Tsipras sworn. Despite representing opposites on the political spectrum, the two parties are expected to unite around their mutual hatred of the EU/International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailouts, which ushered in a series of painful austerity measures in Greece. The former ruling New Democracy was routed in the election and reduced to around 76 seats.

Now the big question is will Greece leave the Euro because the Syriza party ran on its opposition to the bailouts that has led to fears of further instability within the Eurozone. Tsipras, a 40 year-old former Communist youth activist, was sworn in as prime minister Monday, becoming the youngest Greek prime minister in 150 years, promised to end the *"five years of humiliation and pain"* that the country has endured since bailouts saved it from bankruptcy in 2010. *"Greece is leaving behind disastrous austerity,"* he told thousands of flag-waving supporters in Athens: Tsipras repeated his pledge to renegotiate the terms of Greece's \$269bn bailout with the EU and the IMF, but struck a more conciliatory tone than during his fiery campaign. *"The new Greek government will be ready to cooperate and negotiate for the first time with our peers a just, mutually beneficial and viable solution,"* he said.

Turning point?

The Syriza bloc, a coalition of leftist parties in Greece campaigned on a promise to challenge the terms of Eurozone bailouts that stabilized the Greek economy after the 2010 debt crisis. Faced with default, the Greek government accepted packages amounting to 240 billion euros, or \$269 billion. Syriza has criticized the terms of the Greek bailouts, administered by a *"troika"* of the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank, for the austerity measures they placed on the Greek economy. These conditions required Greece to run budget surpluses and cut spending, which critics say have compounded the country's bleak economic picture.

After its most severe crisis since the fall of its military government in 1974, Greece's economy has shrunk by some 25 percent, thousands of businesses have closed, wages and pensions have been reduced, and unemployment stands near 25 percent — a figure that shoots up above 50 percent when looking at joblessness among young people is over 50 percent. At the same time, its public debt has climbed from 146 percent of gross domestic product in 2010 to 177 percent of its GDP, the second highest in the world.

Sunday's vote was Greece's third since 2012, and it came after the current government lost what amounted to a no-confidence measure in December. In the campaign's closing days, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras warned Greeks that leaving the path of austerity and challenging the country's European creditors would lead the country to ruin. In a somber concession speech Sunday night, he took credit for an economy that has shown faint signs of improvement and said he hoped his gloomy forecasts for life under Syriza were wrong. Samaras's backers said they didn't think so. *"It will be a catastrophe,"* said Anna Ventouri, 45, a supermarket cashier who cast her ballot for the incumbents.

“Tsipras says you can renegotiate the bailout, but it’s a big lie. It’s logical that if someone gives you a loan, they’re going to want that money back.”

In Greece’s case, that someone is German Chancellor Angela Merkel. A champion of fiscal rectitude who preaches the gospel of austerity for all that ails Europe, she is considered unlikely to grant Tsipras concessions that could embolden other emerging leftist movements across debt-ridden southern Europe. Although both sides have softened their rhetoric in recent weeks, German leaders have also hinted at a tough line in any talks, with leaks to the media that they are prepared to see Greece leave the euro if a Syriza government tries to renege on its bailout commitments.

Syriza leaders, meanwhile, have been adamant that they do not intend to take Greece back to its pre-2001 currency, the drachma. But they have also said there is no backup plan if European negotiators refuse to budge in canceling Greek debt. *“It’s a game of chicken,”* said Pagoulatos, the economist, in which *“no one intends to crash.”* And yet, a crash could come. The smart move for Europe, Pagoulatos said, would be to co-opt Tsipras by giving him enough of what he wants to neutralize his assault on austerity.

But another option, he said, is for Merkel to dig in, and turn Greece’s leftist experiment *“into a cautionary tale.”* It’s also possible that Syriza will stand in the way of a deal, with its disparate factions unable to agree on any package of concessions that falls short of the lofty promises made on the campaign trail. *“The rank-and-file has a component that is very radicalized,”* Pagoulatos said. *“They are not ready to accept the kind of compromise that the situation requires, especially after generating such expectations for a full rupture with the past.”*

In an op-ed in **The Huffington Post**, Robert Kuttner says that Europe should count itself lucky that a leftwing anti-austerity party won the Greek elections, swept into office by citizens who’ve had enough. Elsewhere in Europe, seven years of stupid, punitive, and self-defeating austerity policies have led to gains by the far right. And if a radical left party is now in power in Athens and sending tremors through Europe’s financial markets, the EU’s smug leaders and their banker allies in Frankfurt, Brussels and Berlin have only themselves to blame.

Background: If you turn the clock back to October 2009, that was when the incoming social democratic government led by PASOK’s George Papandreu discovered and reported that the former conservative government had faked Greece’s budget numbers. The Greek deficit, supposedly three percent of GDP, was more like 12 percent. Financial speculators brutally began punishing Greece, abetted by the Merkel government in Berlin and its allies at the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank.

The speculation against Greek sovereign debt created a *“contagion effect,”* and pretty soon Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain were next. The financial press cutely referred to these nations as the PIIGS, as if their own greed had created the crisis. But the true pigs were the financial markets. The speculative orgy against sovereign debt, coupled with austerity demands to satisfy the financial sharks, only sent Europe deeper into depression and deflation, punishing the weakest.

Kuttner believes that this crisis could have ended years ago with far less suffering for ordinary people who had no responsibilities for the offending policies. Greece, after all, has about two percent of the EU's total economic product -- and it has about 25 percent less than it had before the crisis. (*That's how well austerity medicine worked.*) Writing off Greece's debt outright would have cost peanuts, and still would. And that the EU should have given Greece serious debt relief in 2009. Now, finally, there is a government in Athens that will demand it. But that will require a very high stakes game of chicken. Tsipras has to be willing to risk a default, and the financial shocks that would set off. He has to gamble that the IMF and the European Commission would institute an emergency damage control plan.

Should Greece default on its debts that will bring further hardship on the long-suffering Greeks -- but also on the rest of the European economy? It is in the interest of Merkel and the other leaders of the austerity bloc to relent. Otherwise, Europe's crisis will only deepen. Ironically enough, earlier this month the European Central Bank under President Mario Draghi, after several years of fencing with Merkel, finally mustered the courage and political support to initiate a program of large-scale direct purchases of government bonds. The U.S. version, now winding down, is known by the euphemism Quantitative Easing. But Europe should have begun that policy years ago, before its depression and deflation deepened. Now, Europe is in such a self-inflicted hole that Draghi's bond purchases are likely to be too little and too late.

Merkel and her allies on the European Commission have discouraged these bond purchases because they enable governments to borrow cheaply. If governments can borrow without fear, that undercuts the pressure to cut spending and balance budgets -- the essence of the austerity program. If Draghi's program actually begins bearing some fruit, count on Merkel to frontally oppose it, says Kuttner. And that the Greeks have done the rest of Europe a huge service, because they have called the question. Again Kuttner, *"There is finally a leader willing to stand up and say, enough is enough. Whether the austerity mongers will relent remains to be seen."*

Kuttner points out that at the peak of World War II, Nazi Germany's sovereign debt was 675 percent of GDP. Except that the allies did not treat a defeated Germany the way Merkel treats the Greeks. As part of the postwar reconstruction program, the allies allowed Germany to write off over 90 percent of its debt. In fact, by the early 1950s, Germany, which lost the war, had a much lower debt-to-GDP ratio than Britain or the U.S., which had won the war. The allies did that because they had a Cold War to win, and needed the new German Federal Republic as a stable ally. The multiple sins of the Nazis were not permitted to interfere with a currency reform.

Kuttner again, *"This act of macro-economic mercy has just dropped from German historical consciousness. You would think that Germany is simply associated with fiscal virtue and the Greeks with improvidence, not that German recovery was built on a generous write-off of prior debt by the occupying powers. The Germans also seem to have forgotten that the Nazi occupation of Greece was one of Europe's most brutal. (That may explain the limited appeal of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party in Greece, which polled only about six percent.) If only Greece had lost a war and required a reconstruction program."*

In the 1940s and 1950s, the allies had Stalin to worry about. That made a debt write-off seem the lesser evil, even debt incurred by Hitler. There is no Stalin today, but a democratic leftist is governing in Athens. And far-right parties are banging on the doors of other European countries. Meanwhile, needless suffering in Greece and elsewhere is now in its seventh year. Kuttner, *"Wouldn't it be fitting*

if a rebellion on the part of the brave Greeks led Europe to alter its broader policy of perverse austerity? It's almost too much to hope for, but it's a start." The biggest problem with austerity is that it shoulders the burden of prior excess on the citizens, while giving a pass to the bankers who made billions of dollars and politicians who were complicit in creating the problem. Is this fair? Obviously not based on the election returns in Greece. I guess now we will have to see, who blinks first especially since Chancellor Merkel has ruled out cancelling anymore of Greece's debt.

Ending Greece's Nightmare

Alexis Tsipras, leader of the leftwing Syriza coalition, is about to become prime minister of Greece. He will be the first European leader elected on an explicit promise to challenge the austerity policies that have prevailed since 2010. And there will, of course, be many people warning him to abandon that promise, to behave "*responsibly*."

So how has that responsibility thing worked out so far?

To understand the political earthquake in Greece, it helps to look at Greece's May 2010 "*standby arrangement*" with the International Monetary Fund, under which the so called troika — the ██████, the European Central Bank and the European Commission — extended loans to the country in return for a combination of austerity and reform. It's a remarkable document, in the worst way. The troika, while pretending to be hardheaded and realistic, was peddling an economic fantasy. And the Greek people have been paying the price for those elite delusions.

You see, the economic projections that accompanied the standby arrangement assumed that Greece could impose harsh austerity with little effect on growth and employment. Greece was already in recession when the deal was reached, but the projections assumed that this downturn would end soon — that there would be only a small contraction in 2011, and that by 2012 Greece would be recovering. Unemployment, the projections conceded, would rise substantially, from 9.4 percent in 2009 to almost 15 percent in 2012, but would then begin coming down fairly quickly.

What actually transpired was an economic and human nightmare. Far from ending in 2011, the Greek recession gathered momentum. Greece didn't hit the bottom until 2014, and by that point it had experienced a full fledged depression, with overall unemployment rising to 28 percent and youth unemployment rising to almost 60 percent. And the recovery now underway, such as it is, is barely visible, offering no prospect of returning to pre-crisis living standards for the foreseeable future.

What went wrong? I fairly often encounter assertions to the effect that Greece didn't carry through on its promises, that it failed to deliver the promised spending cuts. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, Greece imposed savage cuts in public services, wages of government workers and social benefits. Thanks to repeated further waves of austerity, public spending was cut much more than the original program envisaged, and it's currently about 20 percent lower than it was in 2010.

Yet Greek debt troubles are if anything worse than before the program started. One reason is that the economic plunge has reduced revenues: The Greek government is collecting a substantially higher share of ██████ in taxes than it used to, but ██████ has fallen so quickly that the overall tax take is down. Furthermore, the plunge in ██████ has caused a key fiscal indicator, the ratio of debt to ██████, to keep rising even though debt growth has slowed and Greece received some modest debt relief in 2012.

Why were the original projections so wildly overoptimistic? As I said, because supposedly hardheaded officials were in reality engaged in fantasy economics. Both the European Commission and the European Central Bank decided to believe in the confidence fairy — that is, to claim that the direct job destroying effects of spending cuts would be more than made up for by a surge in private sector optimism. The ██████ was more cautious, but it nonetheless grossly underestimated the damage austerity would do.

And here's the thing: If the troika had been truly realistic, it would have acknowledged that it was demanding the impossible. Two years after the Greek program began, the ██████ looked for historical examples where Greek type programs, attempts to pay down debt through austerity without major debt relief or inflation, had been successful. It didn't find any.

So now that Mr. Tsipras has won, and won big, European officials would be well advised to skip the lectures calling on him to act responsibly and to go along with their program. The fact is they have no credibility; the program they imposed on Greece never made sense. It had no chance of working.

If anything, the problem with Syriza's plans may be that they're not radical enough. Debt relief and an easing of austerity would reduce the economic pain, but it's doubtful whether they are sufficient to produce a strong recovery. On the other hand, it's not clear what more any Greek government can do unless it's prepared to abandon the euro, and the Greek public isn't ready for that.

Still, in calling for a major change, Mr. Tsipras is being far more realistic than officials who want the beatings to continue until morale improves. The rest of Europe should give him a chance to end his country's nightmare.

Paul Krugman – New York Times – JAN. 26, 2015

THIS WEEK'S QUOTE

"I don't know if it (human activity) is the only cause, but mostly, in great part, it is man who has slapped nature in the face." "We have in a sense taken over nature." "I think we have exploited nature too much," citing deforestation and monoculture.

"Thanks be to God that today there are voices, so many people who are speaking out about it."

Pope Francis

BEST VIDEO OF THE WEEK

As Stupid As They Get....

Methane gas in cow pastures ... you should not play with cow dong !!

Web Link: 

And please do not try this....

THIS WEEK'S MUSIC

2Pac Shakur



One of my favorite artists of all time is **Tupac Amaru Shakur** who was born on June 16, 1971 and was gun down in a drive by shooting on September 13, 1996 after attending the Bruce Seldon vs. Mike Tyson boxing match with Suge Knight at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, Nevada. Also known by his stage names **2Pac** and briefly as **Makaveli**, he was an American rapper, songwriter, and actor. Shakur has sold over 75 million records worldwide, making him one of the best-selling music artists of all time. His double disc albums **All Eyez on Me** and his **Greatest Hits** are among the bestselling albums in the United States. He has been listed and ranked as one of the greatest artists of all time by many magazines, including **Rolling Stone** which ranked him 86th on its list of **The 100 Greatest Artists of All Time**. Consistently ranked as one of the greatest rappers ever, he was ranked number 2 by **MTV** in their list of **The Greatest MCs of All-Time** in 2006. 2Pac is also ranked as the most influential rapper of all time.

Shakur began his career as a roadie, backup dancer, and MC for the alternative hip hop group **Digital Underground**, eventually branching off as a solo artist. The themes of most of Shakur's songs revolved around the violence and hardship in inner cities, racism and other social problems. Both of his parents and several other of his family were members of the Black Panther Party, whose ideals were reflected in his songs. During the latter part of his career, Shakur was a vocal participant in the so-called East Coast–West Coast hip hop rivalry, becoming involved in conflicts with other rappers, producers and record-label staff members, most notably **The Notorious B.I.G.** and the label **Bad Boy Records**. Shakur's music and philosophy is rooted in many American, African-American, and world entities, including the Black Panther Party, Black Nationalism, egalitarianism, and liberty.

Shakur's love of theater and Shakespeare also influenced his work. A student of the Baltimore School for the Arts where he studied theater, Shakur understood the Shakespearian psychology of inter-gang wars and inter-cultural conflict. During a 1995 interview, Shakur stated:

"... I love Shakespeare. He wrote some of the rawest stories, man. I mean look at Romeo and Juliet. That's some serious ghetto shit. You got this guy Romeo from the Bloods who falls for Juliet, a female from the Crips, and everybody in both gangs are against them. So they have to sneak out and they end up dead for nothing. Real tragic stuff. And look how Shakespeare busts it up with Macbeth. He creates a tale about this king's wife who convinces a happy man to chase after her and kill her husband so he can take over the country. After he commits the murder, the dude starts having delusions just like in a Scarface song. I mean the king's wife just screws this guy's whole life up for nothing..."

In a European interview music journalist Chuck Philips said that what impressed him the most about Shakur was that he was a poet. Philips said *"I like sacred texts, myths, proverbs and scriptures. ... When Tupac came along, I thought he was quite the poet... It wasn't just how cleverly they rhymed. It wasn't just the rhythm or the cadence. I liked their attitude. It was protest music in a way nobody had ever thought about before. ... These artists were brave, wise and smart – wickedly smart . The thing about Tupac was he had so many sides. He was unafraid to write about his vulnerabilities."*

Shakur's debut album, **2Pacalypse Now**, revealed the socially conscious side of Shakur. On this album, Shakur attacked social injustice, poverty and police brutality on songs **"Brenda's Got a Baby"**, **"Trapped"** and **"Part Time Mutha"**. His style on this album was highly influenced by the social consciousness and Afrocentrism pervading hip hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On this initial release, Shakur helped extend the success of such rap groups as Boogie Down Productions, Public Enemy, X-Clan, and Grandmaster Flash, as he became one of the first major socially conscious rappers from the West Coast.

On his second record, Shakur continued to rap about the social ills facing African-Americans, with songs like "**The Streetz R Deathrow**" and "**Last Wordz**". He also showed his compassionate side with the anthem "**Keep Ya Head Up**", while simultaneously putting his legendary aggressiveness on display with the title track from the album **Strictly 4 My** [REDACTED]. He added a salute to his former group Digital Underground by including them on the playful track "**I Get Around**". Throughout his career, an increasingly aggressive attitude can be seen pervading Shakur's subsequent albums.

The contradictory themes of social inequality and injustice, unbridled aggression, compassion, playfulness, and hope all continued to shape Shakur's work, as witnessed with the release of his incendiary 1995 album **Me Against the World**. In 1996, Shakur released **All Eyez on Me**. Many of these tracks are considered by many critics to be classics, including "**Ambitionz Az a Ridah**", "**I Ain't Mad at Cha**", "**California Love**", "**Life Goes On**" and "**Picture Me Rollin**". **All Eyez on Me** was a change of style from his earlier works; while still containing socially conscious songs and themes, Shakur's album was heavily influenced by party tracks and tended to have a more "*feel good*" vibe than his first albums. Shakur described it as a celebration of life, and the record was critically and commercially successful.

In 2008, **The National Association Of Recording Merchandisers** in conjunction with the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** recognized him as a very influential artist and has added him in their **Definitive 200 list**. On Wednesday, June 23, 2010, Shakur was inducted to the **Library of Congress's National Recording Registry**. The seat of the Catholic Church released a list of 12 songs onto the social networking Web site's streaming music service. Among the artists included are Mozart, Muse and Dame Shirley Bassey; the list also includes Shakur's song "**Changes**", which was released two years after his shooting death on a greatest hits album in 1998. His double album, **All Eyez on Me**, is one of the highest-selling rap albums of all time, with over 5 million copies of the album sold in the United States alone by April 1996; it was eventually certified 9x platinum in June 1998 by the **RIAA**. In July 2014 it was recertified 10x platinum.

Shakur's hit song "**Dear Mama**" is one of 25 songs that were added to the National Recording Registry in 2010. **The Library of Congress** has called **Dear Mama** a moving and eloquent homage to both the murdered rapper's own mother and all mothers struggling to maintain a family in the face of addiction, poverty and societal indifference." The honor came seven days after what would have been Shakur's 39th birthday. Shakur is the third rapper to enter the library, outside the copyright office, behind Grandmaster Flash and Public Enemy.

"Since his death, Tupac has become an international martyr, a symbol on the level of Bob Marley or Che Guevara, whose life has inspired Tupacistas on the streets of Brazil, memorial murals in the Bronx and Spain, and bandanna-wearing youth gangs in South Africa."

—Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture

Without a doubt, 2Pac is in the front row of the Pantheon of American music. In the book *How to Rap*, Bishop Lamont notes that Shakur "mastered every element, every aspect" of rapping and Fredro Starr

of Onyx says Shakur "was a master of the flow." "Every rapper who grew up in the Nineties owes something to Tupac," wrote 50 Cent. "He didn't sound like anyone who came before him."

██████████ for their part named Shakur the most influential rapper ever. Professor of Communications Murray Forman, of Northeastern University in addressing the symbolism and mythology surrounding Shakur's death he described Shakur as a "prolific artist" who was "driven by a terrible sense of urgency" in a quest to "unify mind, body, and spirit". Shakur's is one of the few artist whose undeniable voice and talent and as a performer crossed racial, ethnic, cultural and medium lines around the world. ***With this, I invite everyone to enjoy the music and voice of Mr. 2Pac Shakur and for those of you who aren't familiar with him or like Hip Hop I strongly urge you to at least listen to Dear Mama as it is one of the greatest musical essays ever written.***

2Pac – ***Changes*** -- <http://youtu.be/uS4CvCGFyqc>

2Pac – ***I Get Around*** -- <http://youtu.be/YqJAnQTwmJs>

2Pac – ***Me Against The World*** -- <http://youtu.be/2civ7hEAytU>

2Pac - ***Dear Mama*** -- <http://youtu.be/Mb1ZvUDvLDY>

2Pac – ***Brenda's Got A Baby*** -- <http://youtu.be/NRWUs0KtB-I>

2Pac – ***It Ain't Easy*** -- http://youtu.be/QufAIYg8__8

2Pac – ***Shed So Many Tears*** -- <http://youtu.be/PIvjfEy4Dk4>

2Pac – ***Unconditional Love*** -- <http://youtu.be/JRp4me54Z9s>

2Pac feat Dr. Dre – ***California Love*** -- <http://youtu.be/5wBTdfAkqGU>

2Pac – ***Letter 2 My Unborn*** -- <http://youtu.be/SPmNQmmMZ84>

2Pac – ***Temptations*** -- <http://youtu.be/Js-oLHa5erM>

2Pac – ***It's All About You*** -- <http://youtu.be/uUnmaC0sg8Q>

2Pac – ***To live and die in LA*** -- http://youtu.be/_m3B060jo_o

2Pac – ***Life Goes On*** -- <http://youtu.be/W69SSLfRJho>

2pac – ***I Ain't Mad At Cha*** -- <http://youtu.be/kt1XjVdyJ6o>

2Pac – ***I Tried*** -- http://youtu.be/yVx_CdH7Zq0

2Pac – ***Only God Can Judge Me*** -- <http://youtu.be/padvnsLUhUM>

2pac – ***Until The End Of Time*** -- <http://youtu.be/r9uEtplq6CI>

I hope that you enjoyed this week's offerings and wish you and yours a great week....

Sincerely,

Greg Brown

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