A NEW PAMPHLET FOR AMERICA'S 250TH YEAR

COMMON SENSE AGAIN

THE EXPANDED PAMPHLET

A new pamphlet for America's 250th year,

inspired by Thomas Paine's 1776 example.

2026

INTRODUCTION

> *Perhaps the sentiments in the following pages are not yet fashionable enough to have earned general favor. A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.*

That paragraph is not mine. I have borrowed it, with small changes, from a pamphlet published in Philadelphia in January of 1776, written by a failed corset-maker and tax collector who had been in America for fourteen months. He wrote it in plain language because he wanted it read aloud in taverns to people who could not read. Within three months it had sold something like a hundred and twenty thousand copies in a country of two and a half million. It did not argue for better management of the colonies. It argued that the arrangement itself was absurd, that everyone already knew it was absurd, and that the only thing standing between the people and a better arrangement was the habit of not saying so.

I am writing two hundred and fifty years later, in a country that is materially the most successful in human history and that cannot pass a budget on time.

I want to be careful about the comparison, because it can be made foolishly. We are not governed by a hereditary monarch three thousand miles away. We are not denied representation. No one is quartering soldiers in your house. The American system in 2026 is not tyranny, and anyone who tells you it is has either read no history or is selling you something.

What we have is different and, in a way, harder. **We have a system that works exactly as designed and produces outcomes almost nobody wants. We have arrived, by a series of small and individually defensible steps, at a machine that reliably converts broad public agreement into nothing at all.** Not through malice. Through incentives.

That is a stranger problem than tyranny, and it is much less satisfying, because there is no villain at the end of it. But it can be fixed, and the fix does not require anyone to change their mind about abortion, or guns, or God, or any of the things Americans actually disagree about.

I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.

I. OF GOVERNMENT IN GENERAL, AND OF THE MACHINE WE HAVE BUILT

> *Some writers have so confounded society with government as to leave little or no distinction between them, whereas they are not only different but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness. Society encourages our happiness by uniting our affections; government, by restraining our vices. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.*

That is Paine, and he is right, and I want to build on it rather than repeat it.

Here is the thing he could not have said in 1776, because the vocabulary did not exist: **a government is a machine, and machines produce what they are built to produce, regardless of the intentions of the people operating them.**

Consider a factory. If a factory is built to make chairs, it makes chairs. You may staff it entirely with people who prefer tables. You may elect a new foreman every two years on a platform of tables. The factory will go on making chairs, because that is what the machinery does, and the honest, table-loving workers will find themselves at the end of each day standing beside a pile of chairs, blaming each other.

This is the condition of American government, and it explains something that otherwise makes no sense.

The thing that makes no sense

Ask an American what they think of Congress and you will hear contempt. Ask them what should be done and you will hear, usually, something quite reasonable. Ask them whether the people in Congress are bad people and most will say yes, they are, and if we could only replace them with better ones the country would improve.

We have tested that theory repeatedly. We throw out the bums about once a decade. In 1994 we threw them out. In 2006 we threw them out. In 2010, 2018, 2022 we threw them out. The new ones arrive, full of intention, and within a term or two they behave like the old ones.

The conclusion most people draw is that power corrupts, or that Washington is a swamp, or that anyone who seeks office is by definition unfit for it. These are satisfying explanations and they are wrong, or at least they are so incomplete as to be useless. Ordinary people, placed in a system that punishes cooperation and rewards conflict, will produce conflict. Not because they are wicked. Because they are ordinary, and because they would like to keep their jobs.

If you want different behavior, you must change what the machine rewards. That is the whole argument of this pamphlet. Everything else is detail.

On the difference between a problem and a symptom

Most political writing addresses symptoms, and I want to say plainly why I am not going to.

Health care in this country is expensive and confusing. Housing costs more than young people can pay. Schools in poor places are worse than schools in rich places. The climate is changing. Machines are learning to do work that people used to do, faster than anyone expected. These are all real, and several of them are more urgent than anything I am going to propose.

But look at what happens when we try to address them. A bill is written. It is loaded with unrelated provisions to buy votes. It is held hostage to a budget fight. It is filibustered, or buried by a leader who never schedules it, or passed in a form so weakened that it does nothing, or passed intact and then reversed by the next administration because it never had support broad enough to survive one.

We are not failing to solve these problems because they are hard, though they are hard. We are failing because the instrument we would have to use is broken. You cannot perform surgery with a bent instrument no matter how well you understand anatomy.

So: fix the instrument first. I am aware of how that sounds. It sounds like a man who has been asked to put out a fire and has begun by organizing the tool shed. I ask only that you read the rest before deciding.

What government is for, stated plainly

Strip away every argument of the last century and there are perhaps four things we need government to do that we cannot do for ourselves.

Keep us safe — from invasion, from violence, from fraud, from the small number of people who will hurt others if nobody stops them.

Enforce the rules fairly — so that a contract means something, so that the powerful cannot simply take from the weak, so that the referee is not on the payroll of one team.

Do the few things markets genuinely cannot — insure against catastrophes too large for individuals to bear, build the things everyone uses and nobody can own, pay for the discoveries that no company can capture the value of.

Keep a floor under people — so that bad luck, bad health, or a bad decade does not end in destitution, because a country where that happens is neither decent nor stable.

Almost every American agrees with that list. The fights are about the size of each item and who pays. Those are real fights and I am not pretending otherwise.

But notice: a government that cannot pass a budget, cannot prevent its own members from trading stocks in the industries they regulate, and cannot close a deal that three-quarters of the country supports is failing at something prior to all four. It is failing at the precondition. It is not doing badly at the argument; it has lost the ability to conclude one.

The one thing the Founders got wrong

I want to say something that risks sounding disrespectful and is not meant to be.

The men who designed this system were extraordinary, and the design has lasted longer than any comparable one. They anticipated tyranny, and built against it beautifully. They anticipated the mob, and built against that too. They understood that men are not angels and constructed a machine that assumed they would not be.

They got one thing badly wrong, and they knew it almost immediately.

They did not plan for political parties. They thought factions would form and dissolve around particular questions, checked by each other, never hardening. Washington devoted a substantial part of his farewell address to warning against exactly what happened — the “spirit of party,” which he said “agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection.”

He wrote that in 1796. Within four years the thing he warned about had taken permanent hold, and it has never let go.

Everything I am going to propose in this pamphlet is, at bottom, an attempt to finish the work those men left unfinished — to build against permanent faction the way they built against tyranny. They would recognize the project. They might even think it overdue.

II. OF PARTY AND FACTION, AND OF THE CLOSED PRIMARY

I now come to the part of this argument that people find hardest to hear, because it asks them to look at something they have looked past their entire lives.

Paine's great act of nerve was to state, in 1776, that hereditary monarchy was ridiculous. Not oppressive — ridiculous. He pointed out that the whole institution rested on the proposition that the accident of birth reliably produces the wisest available person, which no one believed and everyone acted upon. "One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings," he wrote, "is that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion."

He was not making a new argument. Everyone already knew. He was simply the first to say it in print, in plain language, without apology. And once it had been said plainly, it could not be unsaid.

Let me try to do the same thing, on a smaller subject.

The absurdity, stated plainly

In most of this country, the person who will represent you is chosen by a small, unrepresentative group of the most ideologically committed members of one party, in an election almost nobody votes in, months before you are consulted.

That is not a description of a flaw in the system. That is the system, operating normally.

Here is how it works. Roughly eight in ten congressional districts are drawn, or have sorted themselves, so that one party will certainly win the general election. In those districts the November ballot is a formality. The real election is the primary.

Who votes in primaries? Very few people — often ten to twenty percent of eligible voters, and in some races far less. And the ones who do vote are, by self-selection, the most engaged, most partisan, most ideologically motivated slice of the electorate. They are not bad people. They are the people who care most, which is exactly the problem, because caring most and being representative are different things.

So a candidate's first task — before governing, before persuading the country, before anything — is to be maximally appealing to a small group of intensely committed partisans. And the reliable way to appeal to intensely committed partisans is to demonstrate that you will not compromise with the other side.

We have built a filter that selects specifically for the trait that makes governing impossible, and then we act surprised at what comes out of it.

The people we send to Washington are not a random sample of Americans. They are not even a representative sample of their own districts. They are the output of a machine calibrated to produce them.

I am not claiming that closed primaries caused the division we live in. People say it constantly and it does not hold up. Nearly every state had adopted party primaries by 1920, while the bitter division we complain about does not begin until around 1980 — sixty years of the supposed cause with none of the supposed effect. And when researchers compared open, closed, and semi-closed states directly, they found the rules made almost no difference to how extreme the resulting legislators were (McGhee, Masket, Shor, Rogers and McCarty, *American Journal of Political Science*, 2014 — peer-reviewed, and a finding that cuts against my own position). I have read the research on both sides and honesty requires me to report that the pile against me is the larger one.

What I am claiming is this: in most of this country, the election that decides who represents you is one you are not permitted to vote in.

Here is why that matters. Whoever wins that seat knows exactly who put them there, and it was not you. A politician answers to the people who can end his career, and in a safe district those people are a small and committed slice of one party. You are governed by someone you had no hand in choosing, who has no particular reason to care what you think. That would be an outrage if it produced the most reasonable legislature ever assembled — and here I follow Paine exactly, for he did not object to hereditary monarchy on the grounds that it administered badly. He objected because the thing itself was absurd.

And then it gets worse

Suppose a member arrives in Washington with genuine intentions to work across the aisle. What happens?

They discover that the people who fund campaigns fund intensity, not moderation. Small-dollar fundraising in particular — which we were told would democratize politics — turns out to reward outrage with extraordinary efficiency. A furious email raises money. A reasonable one does not. A member who spends a weekend negotiating a bipartisan compromise raises less than a member who spends an afternoon insulting the other side on television.

They discover that party leadership controls what reaches the floor, and that a leader can kill a bill supported by a majority of the chamber simply by never scheduling a vote on it. No one has to vote it down. No one has to explain. It just never happens, and nobody is accountable, because nothing occurred.

They discover that the media ecosystem, on all sides, is a business, and the business runs on attention, and attention runs on conflict. A member who solves a problem gets no coverage. A member who picks a fight gets a segment.

And they discover — this is the part people underestimate — that a solved problem is a liability. If your party has campaigned for twenty years on the border, what exactly do you campaign on the year after you fix it? A solved problem is a fundraising email you can no longer send, a rally you can no longer hold, an opponent you can no longer run against.

I do not say that every officeholder thinks this consciously. I say the system rewards it, and over time people drift toward what they are rewarded for, usually without noticing.

The proof, in one vote

I could argue this abstractly for pages. Instead let me give you one example from the past month, and let you judge.

Nearly nine in ten Americans think members of Congress should not trade stocks in the companies they regulate. Not a slim majority — eighty-six percent. Eighty-seven percent of Republicans. Eighty-eight percent of Democrats. Eighty-one percent of independents. There is almost nothing else in American public life with numbers like that. You cannot get eighty-six percent of Americans to agree on pizza toppings.

On the twenty-second of July, 2026, the House of Representatives finally voted on it.

What passed still permits members to sell the holdings they already own. On its way to the floor it was tied to an unrelated fight about voter identification. It passed two hundred thirty-two to one hundred ninety-eight — every Republican and thirteen Democrats — which is to say it split almost exactly along party lines.

An idea that four out of five Americans in every party support, and the machine could not produce a clean version of it.

The easy conclusion is that they are crooks — that people who profit from trading stocks wrote themselves a bill permitting them to keep trading. I want to take that conclusion seriously before setting it aside, because it is the one most readers will reach, and because it is what I believed myself for a long time.

I no longer think it is right. Every person in that story can defend what they did. The members who voted no had real objections. The ones who attached the voter-ID provision were running an ordinary legislative play, the same one every majority has run for two centuries. Nobody took a bribe. Nobody broke a rule. Nobody had to.

The system produced that result while functioning exactly as designed. That is the whole point, and it is far more damning than a conspiracy would be. A conspiracy can be exposed. A design has to be repaired.

And repair is what I mean — not replacement. The foundations of this country are sound and I would not touch them. What has failed is a layer of rules and habits laid down on top of them over two centuries, most adopted for sensible reasons, none designed to work together, several now producing the opposite of what they were meant to produce. The gaps opened as the country changed around them. They can be closed without disturbing anything that makes America what it is.

On the two parties, and the folly of choosing between them

Here I will say the thing that costs me friends in both directions.

The two parties in this country each possess half of what a government needs, and each is missing the other half.

One party cares about people and cannot build anything. It can describe a problem with real moral force. It can identify who is being hurt and why it matters. And then it produces a program so encrusted with process, so eager to satisfy every constituency and offend none, that the thing never gets built, or gets built at four times the cost, a decade late. Its compassion is genuine. Its competence is not.

The other party can build and does not seem to care who it lands on. It can execute. It can cut through process. It understands that a thing which cannot be delivered is not a policy but a wish. And then it delivers something that leaves the weakest people worse off and calls the damage a market outcome. Its competence is genuine. Its concern is not.

I am not interested in choosing between these. I have been told my whole adult life that I must, and that refusing is a form of cowardice. I think the opposite is true. **Choosing is the cowardice.** It is the easy thing — it gets you a team, a set of ready-made opinions, and the pleasant certainty that the people who disagree with you are wicked rather than merely mistaken.

What I want is a government that can execute and whose execution leaves people better off. Both, in the same bill. That is not a compromise between the two parties. It is a standard neither currently meets.

The objection I hear most, answered

“You are describing the middle. The middle has no constituency. Every attempt at this fails.”

The objection is serious and the history supports it. In 2024 an organization called No Labels spent a year and a great deal of money attempting to field a centrist presidential ticket. They approached roughly thirty plausible candidates. All thirty declined. Both major parties worked actively to kill the effort. It collapsed without ever naming a candidate.

I take the lesson, but I think the lesson is different from the one usually drawn.

No Labels failed because it was offering *moderation*, which is not a thing anyone wants. Moderation is a temperature, not a program. Nobody has ever marched for lukewarm. When you ask people to meet in the middle, you are asking each of them to accept a third of what they wanted, in a form nobody will defend when it comes under attack.

I am not proposing that we split the difference. I am proposing that we take the deals where both sides can win at the same time.

Those deals exist. On the border, on the budget, on retirement, on corruption, there is an arrangement available in which the right gets something it has genuinely wanted for decades and the left gets something it has genuinely wanted for decades, and neither had to lose for the other to win.

We do not make those deals. Not because they are hard to find — they are sitting in plain view, and I will show you several. We do not make them because **the fight is worth more to the people having it than the fix is.**

That is the sentence I would most like you to remember from this pamphlet. Everything in the next section is an illustration of it.

III. THOUGHTS ON THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS

I ask you to set aside, for an hour, what team you belong to, and to look at the country the way you would look at a house you were thinking of buying. Not at the paint. At the foundation, the wiring, the roof.

Six things are wrong with the house. I will take them in order.

First, on how much we actually disagree

Everything that follows rests on a claim many readers will reject before they read it, so let me put it first and defend it.

We disagree with each other considerably less than we have been told.

Researchers call it the perception gap. The method is simple: ask partisans to estimate what share of the other side holds extreme positions, then go and ask the other side what it actually thinks, and compare.

Democrats and Republicans each guessed that roughly fifty-five percent of their opponents hold extreme views. The measured figure was about thirty. Both sides were wrong by nearly double, in the same direction, about people they live among.

Two findings deserve to be better known. Heavy news consumption — all of it, not merely social media, but cable, talk radio, newspapers, local broadcast — is associated with a *wider* gap, not a narrower one. The more news you take in, the more wrong you are likely to be about your neighbors. And education makes it worse rather than better; among the groups studied, college-educated liberals held a notably distorted picture of Republicans.

That inverts the usual story. We are told polarization is a problem of ignorance and the cure is more information. The evidence suggests the information environment is a substantial part of the disease.

Now the honest limit, which I will not skip past.

This does not mean disagreement is fake. Americans hold real, deep, non-negotiable differences about abortion, about firearms, about the place of religion in public life, about what we owe people who are not citizens. Those are not misunderstandings, and anyone who tells you a better voting method will make abortion less contentious is not to be trusted.

The narrower claim is this: **on the questions that determine whether the country functions, the public is far closer to agreement than the political system reflects.** Whether Congress should trade stocks. Whether budgets should pass on time. Whether the border should be controlled. Whether a person who has lived here twenty years, worked, paid taxes, and broken no law should be deported. Whether ordinary people should own something.

These are not fifty-one to forty-nine questions. They are seventy-thirty and eighty-twenty questions. And they produce nothing.

If I am wrong about this — if Americans really are as divided as the political class — then most of what follows is useless, and institutional reform will only give us prettier gridlock. I want that stated plainly rather than buried, because it is the load-bearing beam of the whole structure.

Second, on the border, and twenty years of theater

Here is a deal that has been available since roughly 2006.

Control the border for real. Fund enough officers, judges, and adjudicators that a case is decided in weeks rather than years. Make the lawful path work, so that a person who wants to come here and build something can do it without a lottery. Remove people who commit serious violent crimes, with actual convictions and actual due process. And for the people who have been here for a decade or two, working, raising children, paying taxes, breaking no law: give them a way to register, be checked, pay what is owed, wait their turn, and become Americans.

Ask an ordinary American about each half of that separately and you will find majorities for both. Ask about them together and the majorities grow, because most people understand intuitively that neither half works without the other.

Now consider what has happened to it.

In 2024 three senators — James Lankford, a conservative Republican from Oklahoma; Kyrsten Sinema; and Chris Murphy — negotiated the most serious border bill in a generation. It raised the standard for asylum claims. It gave the president authority to close the border when crossings surged. By any historical measure it was an enormous concession from the Democratic side.

Then the party's leader came out against it, and the party followed.

Here is the detail I want you to hold onto. When the bill finally came to a vote, **Lankford voted against his own bill.** So did Sinema. Not because they had changed their minds about a single provision in it. Because by then the vote was no longer about the border. It had become, in Sinema's words, a way to point the finger back at the other party.

Picture that. A man spends four months of his life in a room negotiating the hardest problem in American politics, produces a bill, watches his own side turn on it because solving the problem would cost them the issue, and then walks onto the Senate floor and votes no on the thing with his name on it.

That is not corruption. Nobody was bribed. That is a man responding rationally to what the system rewards, and the system rewarded him for killing his own work.

I do not know how to describe that as anything other than a system that has stopped trying. The deal was not too hard to find. It was written down, in legislative text, with two parties' fingerprints on it. It was unclaimable, because closing it would have handed the other side a victory in an election year.

Twenty years. Millions of people living in a state of permanent provisional existence. Communities frightened. Employers dependent on workers who cannot complain. A border that functions badly. And an available deal, sitting on the table, that nobody will pick up.

Third, on money, and a number almost nobody knows

Let me now tell you something about the federal budget that changed how I think about all of this.

The usual argument runs one of two ways. The right says we spend too much. The left says we tax the wealthy too little. Both sides have been making their case for forty years with remarkable consistency and remarkably little effect.

Here are the figures for this year, from the Congressional Budget Office.

Federal debt held by the public reaches about one hundred and one percent of everything the country produces in a year. CBO projects one hundred and twenty percent within a decade. Interest on that debt now costs roughly a trillion dollars a year, heading toward two point one trillion by 2036.

The deficit this year is about five point eight percent of the economy.

Now take out the interest. What remains — every soldier, every road, every research grant, every benefit check, the entire operating cost of the United States government minus debt service — is a deficit of about two point six percent. And CBO projects it stays below that for the next ten years.

Interest is now larger than everything else in the deficit combined.

Read that again, because it reframes the whole argument. We are not primarily overspending on programs. We are paying, with compound interest, for thirty years of decisions nobody was willing to make.

Each of those deferrals was individually rational. It is always easier to borrow than to tell someone no. Every Congress, of both parties, faced a choice between a hard conversation and a bond issue, and chose the bond issue. None of them did anything outrageous. The outrage is cumulative.

So the fiscal crisis is not a spending story or a taxing story. **It is the same story as the border.** It is what happens when an institution loses the ability to close a deal and borrows instead, over and over, until the borrowing becomes the largest single thing it does.

That is why I do not believe you can fix the budget without fixing the machine. You would be asking the same institution that could not make the decision the first thirty times to make it the thirty-first.

Fourth, on retirement, and a date certain

There is a specific date attached to this, which is unusual in politics and worth attending to.

Social Security's retirement trust fund runs short in **2032**. Not "eventually." Not "if trends continue." It is the finding of the program's own trustees, with a year printed on it. At that point the money coming in covers about seventy-eight percent of the benefits promised. The remaining twenty-two percent does not exist.

Let me make that concrete, because a percentage is easy to read past.

The average retired worker in this country collects a little under two thousand dollars a month. Seventy-eight percent of two thousand is fifteen hundred and sixty. So the arithmetic, as current law stands, delivers a cut of roughly four hundred and forty dollars a month — about five thousand dollars a year — to a person living on twenty-four thousand.

Not to a hypothetical person. To your mother, or to you.

And it arrives on a date we already know, six years from now, to a person who spent forty years being told this money would be there.

Nothing in current law addresses this. Both parties know. Both parties have concluded, correctly, that the first one to propose a specific fix will be attacked for it by the other, and so the responsible move — in the logic of the machine — is to say nothing and let it arrive.

I want to say something about the shape of this program that is rarely said clearly, because both sides misrepresent it.

Social Security is not a savings account. There is no vault with your money in it. The payroll taxes taken from working people this month are paid out to retirees this month. It is a promise, backed by the willingness of future workers to keep paying, and nothing else.

It is also not merely a retirement program. It is insurance. It pays if you are disabled at thirty. It pays your children if you die at forty. It pays if you live to a hundred and two and outlast everything you saved. It pays proportionally more to people who earned less. Comparing its "return" to the stock market is like comparing an insurance premium to a bet — you are not meant to come out ahead; you are meant to be protected.

Both of those things are true, and both matter for what I will propose.

Fifth, on who owns America

Here is a question that is not asked often enough.

If you are an ordinary American — a nurse, an electrician, a teacher, a person who drives a truck — what do you own?

Take a warehouse worker in a distribution center outside any American city. She loads packages onto trucks. The building she works in is owned by a real estate trust. The robots beside her are owned by the company. The company is owned by shareholders. The software routing her cart was written by a firm with a market value larger than most countries.

She owns her car, which she is still paying for. She may own a house, if she was born early enough. She owns her labor, which is being automated around her in real time.

She does not own one share of any of it.

That is the shape of the thing. A retirement account if her employer offers one and she could spare the contribution — roughly half of private-sector workers cannot. And a promise from the government that in some decades a check will arrive, its size to be determined by a political fight that has not happened yet.

What she does not own is any piece of what actually creates wealth in this country: the productive capital. The buildings. The companies. The machines standing next to her.

For most of American history this mattered less than it does now, because a person could trade labor for a decent life, and the returns to labor and the returns to capital rose together roughly enough. That relationship has been coming apart for forty years. And it is about to come apart considerably faster.

I am not going to make dramatic predictions about artificial intelligence, because nobody knows and the people who claim to know are selling something. But I will make one narrow observation that seems hard to dispute. **If machines take over a growing share of the work, then the returns to owning machines rise and the returns to being able to work fall.** In that world, the question of who owns the machines stops being an abstraction and becomes the central political question of the century.

A country in which most people own nothing but their capacity to labor, in an economy where labor's share is falling, has a serious problem coming. Not a moral problem. A structural one. And you cannot tax your way out of it if the underlying ownership is concentrated enough, because at some point you are simply redistributing from a small group to everyone else forever, and that arrangement has never been stable anywhere.

The alternative is that everyone owns some.

Sixth, on what all of this has in common

Look at these five things together — the border, the debt, retirement, ownership, and the stock-trading vote — and a pattern emerges that I find more persuasive than any single one of them.

In every case, a solution is available. In every case, that solution requires someone currently holding leverage to give it up. And in every case, the solution does not happen.

The border deal required both parties to surrender an election issue. It died.

The budget requires someone to say no to a constituency. Nobody does; we borrow.

Retirement requires the first mover to absorb an attack. Nobody moves.

The stock-trading ban required members of Congress to give up an advantage they personally enjoy. They passed a version that lets them keep selling.

This is not a coincidence, and it is not a story about bad people. It is what a machine does when it has been built, accidentally, to reward holding leverage over using it.

And once you see it, you see it everywhere, including in places where your own side is the one holding the leverage. That last part is the hard bit. I am not exempt from it and neither are you.

If I had to reduce this entire pamphlet to a single sentence, it would be this one: **nobody will close a deal that lets the other side win too.** That is the failure.

Everything else I have described is either a cause of it or a consequence of it. The closed primary is a cause — it selects for people who prove themselves by refusing. Legalized self-dealing is a cause — it removes every personal penalty for refusing. The debt is a consequence, thirty years of refusals compounding at interest. The border is a consequence. The stock vote is the whole thing performed in miniature, in a single afternoon, over an idea that eighty-six percent of us share.

IV. OF OUR PRESENT ABILITY, AND WHAT IS TO BE DONE

Paine devoted his fourth section to a question his critics thought decisive: granted that independence is right, can America actually manage it? He answered with arithmetic. He counted the ships. He priced out a navy, tallied the timber and the iron and the tar, and demonstrated on paper that the thing could be built.

I intend to do the same, and I will start where he started — with the question of whether any of this is achievable, because that objection has been thrown at every reform proposal in my lifetime.

The answer is that much of it is already happening

I could have written this pamphlet as a list of things I would like. It would be weaker and it would also be false, because several of these ideas are not hypothetical. They are law, or they are moving through Congress right now with support from both parties.

Every newborn American now receives an investment account. It began on the fourth of July this year. A thousand dollars at birth, in a low-cost index fund, locked until eighteen. More than six million accounts have been opened. It was enacted by a Republican administration, developed with private investors, and it passed.

Federal student lending is now tied to outcomes. A law passed last year applies an earnings test to nearly every program in American higher education. A program whose graduates cannot earn enough to repay loses access to federal loans. It takes effect in 2027.

A ban on congressional stock trading is live and bipartisan. Senators Hawley and Ossoff — who agree on virtually nothing else — are on the same bill.

A bill to end government shutdowns permanently is live and bipartisan. Senators Lankford and Hassan, joined by Crapo and Blackburn, would keep funding flowing automatically at prior-year levels when Congress misses its deadline, and require members to stay in Washington until they finish.

Nonpartisan primaries are already running in California, Washington and Louisiana, and **independent map commissions** in Arizona, California, Michigan and Colorado — with fifteen years of data behind them.

So the question is not whether these things are possible. They are. The question is which ones move and which ones die, and that turns out to be the most instructive thing in this entire pamphlet.

Now look at what got cut

The student-loan law originally made colleges share the losses. If a school's program left graduates unable to repay, the school would bear part of the cost — which is the only provision that would actually change institutional behavior. It was written. It was debated. The Senate stripped it out. What survived was a test that punishes students' choices and leaves the institutions untouched.

The stock-trading bill passed in a form that lets members sell what they already own — which is to say, it addresses the appearance and not the substance.

The border deal died when its own author voted against it.

Do you see it? The measures that pass are the ones that cost nobody their leverage. The measures that get stripped, weakened, or killed are the ones that take leverage away from the people holding the vote.

Four demonstrations in eighteen months. I did not have to theorize any of this. I had only to read the legislative record.

And here is what nobody has proposed

I want to be equally honest about the thing that has *not* happened, because it is the heart of the fiscal argument and it would be easy to overclaim.

The newborn accounts are a fine thing, and they are a supplement bolted onto a system that is otherwise unchanged. Social Security remains what it was — pay-as-you-go, unreformed, running short in 2032. A thousand dollars at birth does not alter that arithmetic in any way.

What I am proposing is different in kind, and nobody in American politics has seriously argued for it since 2005: **that for people young enough to plan around it, participating in the growth of the American economy should become the primary way one retires, with public insurance as the floor underneath rather than the whole of it.**

The machinery to do this now exists. The argument for it has not been made.

The three repairs

Everything I have described comes down to three changes. I state them plainly and then say what each side gets, because if a reform cannot be sold to both halves of the country it will be repealed by whichever half did not get it.

A fair reader will notice that only the first of these three is about how government works, and that the other two are ordinary policy. Why are they here at all? Two reasons.

People vote their fears, and these are the two largest. A border nobody controls and an old age nobody can afford are precisely what make a citizen willing to back the candidate who promises never to give an inch. New rules take a decade to settle into habit. If those two fears burn the whole time, the new rules will be torn up long before they take hold.

And these two are the proof. I have asserted that deals exist in which both sides win at once. That is easy to assert. So take the two hardest cases in American life — the angriest and the most expensive — where a bargain has sat in plain view for twenty years and no one has closed it. Close them, and no one can tell me the rest cannot be done.

THE FIRST REPAIR: Change who gets in, and what they may do once there

Put every candidate on one primary ballot. No separate party primaries. Everyone runs, every voter participates regardless of party, and the two candidates with the most support go to November.

But *how* you mark that ballot decides whether the reform works at all, and I want to be careful here, because I changed my mind about it.

The obvious design is the one most places use: pick one name. It fails, and it fails in a way that matters. When four candidates on one side split their supporters and two on the other side split only two ways, the side with more choices loses — this happened in California in 2012, where half the primary electorate chose Democrats and not one Democrat appeared on the November ballot. And once that risk exists, parties stop leaving it to chance. They clear the field, move money to a chosen candidate, and in at least one case a candidate quietly encouraged the other side's voters toward the opponent he preferred to face. The party still picks your finalists. It simply does it earlier and less visibly.

So rather than argue about plumbing, let me state what any such system must accomplish, and then give my answer.

1. **Everyone votes in the election that actually decides the seat.** In a district drawn safe for one party, the primary *is* the election. Excluding most citizens from it cannot be defended.
2. **Supporting one candidate must never harm another candidate you would also accept.** This is the test that matters most and the one pick-one fails. If backing a moderate can cost you your favorite, voters will calculate and parties will manipulate, and you arrive back where you began.
3. **The winner must hold real majority support**, not a plurality of a divided field.
4. **An ordinary voter must be able to understand it while standing in line**, and it must be countable on the equipment we already own and checkable by hand.

My answer is the simplest design I can find that passes all four: check every candidate you would accept, and the two with the most support go to November. No ranking, no rounds of elimination, no penalty for generosity. St. Louis has done it this way since 2021.

Why not ranked choice, which is what most reformers now advocate? Because of one election, and it deserves telling.

Alaska, 2022. Three finalists remained: Mary Peltola, Sarah Palin, and Nick Begich. On the ballots Alaskans actually cast, Begich would have beaten **both** of the others in a straight two-way contest. He was the man a majority of Alaskans preferred to either alternative. Ranked choice eliminated him first, because fewer voters had written him in the top slot — and the seat went to a candidate whom a majority had ranked below him.

The theorists have a name for this and it is not a plain one. Here is the plain one: **the middle gets squeezed out.** The candidate who is broadly acceptable but nobody's passion is precisely the candidate ranked choice discards — and precisely the candidate this pamphlet exists to elect. To adopt ranked choice would be to adopt the very failure my four tests were written to prevent. Under an approval ballot with two finalists it cannot happen: Begich is approved by Palin's voters and by many of Peltola's, he advances, and the runoff produces the answer the ballots already contained.

I will not oversell my own answer, either. St. Louis is now the only city in America using approval voting — North Dakota outlawed both approval and ranked choice in 2025, which ended Fargo's experiment.[1] And St. Louis has seen a repeal attempt led by members of its Board of Aldermen, on the argument that approval voting can dilute the strength of a united minority: a group voting as one for a single candidate can be outvoted by a larger group approving several. That is a serious objection and I do not think it has been well answered.[2] Ranked choice's own record is worse — six of seven statewide measures defeated in 2024, thirteen states banning it outright, Alaska's system surviving repeal by some seven hundred votes.[3] Neither is proven.

So it is the best answer I can come up with, and it has never been tried above the level of a city. I am very open to a better one from people who study elections for a living — on one condition: that it passes those four tests more completely than this does. The tests are the proposal. The mechanism is my answer to them, and I would rather be corrected now than be wrong at scale later.

And the districts must be drawn by someone other than the politicians running in them. Reforming the primary while leaving the map alone is rearranging furniture: if a district is drawn seventy-thirty, November is a formality no matter who the finalists are. Maps drawn by independent commissions produce a median of fifteen percent competitive seats. Maps drawn by legislatures produce five point seven.

Independence here is not a matter of trusting good people. It is engineered: no politicians, lobbyists, or party officials, extending to their families; commissioners drawn by lottery from a screened pool rather than appointed; and — the provision that actually does the work — no map may be adopted without the affirmative votes of Democrats, Republicans, and unaffiliated members alike. A partisan map cannot pass, because passing requires consent from the people it would harm.

Index funds only, while in office. Members of Congress, senior officials, and their spouses and children may hold broad-market funds, Treasury bonds, cash, and a home. Nothing they can move with a vote, a hearing, or a phone call. Full and fast disclosure. And the rules against evasion — through trusts, shell companies, relatives, arranged trades — written first, not added later, because "later" is where every ethics rule in American history has gone to die.

Any bill with real support from both parties gets a recorded vote. If a measure clears a meaningful threshold of bipartisan sponsorship, it goes to committee and then to the floor within a fixed window. Leadership loses the power to kill a popular bill by simply never scheduling it. Members lose the ability to hide.

If Congress misses the budget deadline, two things happen automatically. Funding continues at existing levels — so no shutdown, no hostages, no federal workers wondering about their mortgage. And every member of the chamber that failed stands for re-election immediately. Not at the next scheduled election. Immediately.

Emergencies pause the clock, and the pause expires on its own.

What each side gets: everyone gets representatives who answer to voters rather than to donors and party leadership. The right has spent a decade complaining about party machines choosing candidates; this ends it. The left has spent a decade complaining about legalized corruption; this ends that. There is less genuine ideological conflict in this repair than in anything else I propose, which is why I would do it first.

THE SECOND REPAIR: Close the immigration deal

Control the border, and fix legal immigration, in the same bill, at the same time. Enough staffing and adjudication capacity to decide a case in weeks. Working ports of entry. Fast triage of asylum claims. Real consequences for repeated unlawful entry after a fair hearing.

And more people admitted legally, not fewer — chosen by skill, by demand, by what they intend to build, rather than by lottery. When I say close the border I mean control it. I want more immigrants, arriving through a front door that functions.

Remove people who commit serious violent crimes. Real convictions, real due process, and a definition written narrowly enough that it cannot quietly expand later to mean something else. An arrest is not a conviction. This distinction is the entire difference between law enforcement and something else.

Stop the indiscriminate raids. Enforcement aimed at public safety, not at making entire neighborhoods afraid to go to work or send their children to school. A policy whose mechanism is fear is not a policy; it is a mood, and it will not survive contact with the American conscience.

And a path for the people already here. Register. Submit to a background check. Pay your taxes and a penalty. Wait the years. Stay out of trouble. Then residency, then citizenship.

That is not amnesty. Amnesty means forgetting. This is a line — a long one, with requirements — that a person can actually stand in.

What each side gets: the right gets a border that finally works, an end to lottery-based admission, and the removal of genuinely dangerous people. The left gets millions of established residents out of the shadows and onto a road to citizenship, and an end to enforcement by terror. Neither is a concession. Both are victories, and they are only available together.

The two halves must be simultaneous. Every previous attempt failed the same way: one side got its half, the other half never arrived, and twenty years later we are here. Implementation triggers, funding, deadlines, and judicial review have to be written into the same statute, executing on the same clock.

THE THIRD REPAIR: Make the books honest and give everyone a stake

The debt can't grow faster than the country does. Judge the rule over a rolling period, not a single year, and have an independent body score it. Leave real room to borrow in a war, a crash, or a pandemic, but make that authority expire automatically after two years. Any extension requires a new recorded supermajority vote, and the excess debt returns to the normal rule on a published ten-year path, so an emergency ceiling cannot become the new floor.

Tax the same income at the same rate. A dollar should not get a lower rate because it arrives as a capital gain or carried interest instead of a paycheck. Income should not escape tax forever because someone borrows against stock rather than selling it.

An investment account for every American, beginning at birth. Put it by default in a low-cost, diversified fund whose risk adjusts automatically with age and funded status. It gets safer as retirement approaches or as the account becomes large enough to fund the floor, and published rebalancing rules keep it from dumping assets all at once after a crash. Fund the seed with new money, never by diverting payroll taxes paying current retirees. Roughly 3.6 million births a year at $10,000 each costs about **$36 billion a year**; $10,000 left alone becomes something like $800,000 by age 65.

The default is a rule, not a bet

The default portfolio shifts from growth toward safety as a person ages and also as the balance becomes large enough to finance the insured floor. The rebalancing schedule is published in advance and designed not to dump assets mechanically after a crash. People remain free to depart from it. The government simply does not insure the extra loss created by that choice.

The floor is limited insurance, not a second system

Put a limited insurance floor under the account, not a second retirement system beside it. If you follow the default strategy and low lifetime earnings or poor market returns still leave you below a defined minimum retirement income, the government fills only that gap. Set the full-career floor at 125% of the poverty line, about $1,660 a month in 2026. A comparable minimum benefit has been scored at 0.16% of taxable payroll, roughly **$20 billion a year** on the 2026 payroll base, though the exact account design still requires an actuarial score. You may invest more aggressively, but the guarantee covers only what the default strategy would have produced. At retirement, enough of the balance becomes a payment that lasts for life. Disability and survivor insurance remain because they cover different risks.

Social Security currently combines retirement, disability, survivor, longevity, and redistributive functions. Accounts replace only the retirement check for the cohorts fully entering the new system. Disability and survivor insurance remain. Longevity is handled principally with the worker's own balance, by converting enough at claim into a payment that lasts for life.

The floor is tested against what the default strategy would have produced, not the balance after a person chose a riskier portfolio. Follow the default and fall short because lifetime earnings were low or markets disappointed, and the floor fills the gap. Take more risk and win, and the upside is yours. Take more risk and lose, and the extra loss is yours.

The roughly $20 billion annual figure is a benchmark, not a final actuarial score. SSA's actuary estimated a comparable minimum benefit at 0.16% of taxable payroll. Applied to the 2026 payroll base, that is about $17.7 billion, rounded here to $20 billion. The exact account-and-floor design must be scored before enactment.

A transition by age, without a new catch-up fund

Phase it in by age without breaking promises. Anyone who is 60 to 65 when the law takes effect keeps the full Social Security benefit currently scheduled. People 40 to 59 receive an age-phased legacy benefit, larger for those closer to retirement and smaller for those with more time to build an account, plus the new account itself. Their combined retirement income can never fall below the insured floor. People under 40 enter the account-and-insurance system. No payroll tax is diverted from benefits owed today. The old system's existing shortfall is separate: lift the payroll cap, trim benefits at the top, and do not raise the retirement age.

This replaces the earlier idea of a separate roughly $1 trillion middle-cohort catch-up fund. The transition now preserves all or part of the benefit already scheduled under Social Security, with the share determined by age at enactment, while the new account has more time to grow for younger people. Preserved legacy benefits belong to the old system's existing financing obligation; they are not a second new promise layered on top.

Do not raise the retirement age

Life-expectancy gains have been distributed unequally. A uniform age increase lands hardest on people with physically demanding work and shorter lives. Close the old system's shortfall by lifting the payroll cap and trimming benefits at the top of the formula, not by making everyone wait longer.

Address the student-debt problem once, then stop recreating it. For existing federal loans, credit past payments, stop balances from growing when borrowers make reasonable income-based payments, and close out what remains after a fixed term of good-faith repayment. For future loans, fund only programs whose graduates can reasonably repay, and make colleges absorb a meaningful share of every loss when they cannot. Grants and access for low-income students remain.

What each side gets: the right gets enforceable spending discipline, market participation, and an end to open-ended lending. The left gets tax fairness, a workable student-debt reset, and universal ownership - a real asset for people who have never held one.

The test that every idea here has to pass

I have thrown out perhaps half of what I originally believed by applying one question, and I recommend it to you as a general instrument of political hygiene.

Would I still want this rule if the politician I trust least were the one holding it?

Not the politician I dislike. The one I actually fear. Picture them in the office, with this rule in their hand, and ask whether you would still want the rule to exist.

If the answer is no, then what you have is not a rule. It is a weapon, and the thing about weapons is that they change hands. Every power you build for your side will be inherited by the other within a decade or two — this is not a risk, it is a certainty, it is how the system works and always has.

This is the single most useful idea in this pamphlet and it costs nothing to adopt. You can apply it this evening, to whatever your own side is currently proposing.

On what is deliberately not here

First, term limits — which I weighed for a long while and set aside.

Between two-thirds and five-sixths of Americans want them. They would pass my one test without difficulty. Leaving them out costs me something, and I know it.

I set them aside because they would worsen the very thing I am trying to cure. The failure at the heart of this pamphlet is that nobody will close a deal. Deals are closed between people who expect to meet again next session, and the session after that; trust is nothing more than the accumulated record of previous dealings. Term limits cut that record short, and end every career in a final term in which the officeholder has nothing left to trade. One would be attacking the deal-closing problem by abolishing the conditions under which deals are struck.

The states that have tried it discovered something further. Fifteen have limited their legislators' terms, and the knowledge does not vanish when the legislators do — it migrates, to the lobbyists and the permanent staff, who remain. A first-term representative seated across from a man who has worked that committee for twenty years is outmatched before he opens his mouth, and it shows in the budgets those states produce.[4]

But the plainest reason is this. **A term limit is a workaround for an election that does not work.** It is what a people reach for when they cannot rid themselves of a man by ordinary means — and the reason they cannot is that his district was drawn safe and his primary was closed to them. I propose to repair both directly. Do that, and no artificial limit on service is needed, because the genuine article is restored: voters who may end a career whenever they choose to. Fail to do it, and a term limit will not save you either.

And then the subjects I have deliberately let alone. Health care. Housing. Schools. Climate. Artificial intelligence.

Their absence is not an accident and not an oversight. Several of them matter more than anything I have written. Health care in this country is a system in which nearly every participant's incentives point away from health. Housing is, I think, straightforwardly a supply problem that a functioning political system could address and a broken one cannot. And on artificial intelligence I hold the least confidence of all — it is entirely possible that it will not wait for us to put our house in order, and if that is true then the sequencing I am proposing is a mistake.

But I keep arriving at the same place.

We do not solve any of them with a government that cannot pass a budget on time, cannot stop its own members from trading on their oversight work, and cannot close a deal that three-quarters of the country already wants.

Fix the instrument. Then the hard arguments can be had honestly, and the answers will survive the next election.

Of our present ability

Paine's critics said America was too weak, too scattered, too dependent to stand alone. He answered that the country had never been better positioned than at that moment, and that waiting would only make it harder — that a continent still small enough to agree on something should agree on it now, before its interests hardened and its factions calcified.

I will make the reverse of that argument, and I think it is the stronger one.

We are not too weak. We are the wealthiest society that has ever existed, in possession of the best universities, the deepest capital markets, the most productive firms, and a population still, whatever we tell each other, remarkably willing to help a neighbor. Nothing material stands in the way of any of this.

What stands in the way is a habit. A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, which gives it a superficial appearance of being right.

We have grown accustomed to a government that cannot finish anything. We have adjusted to it, the way a person adjusts to a bad back — organizing life around the limitation until the limitation seems like a feature of the world rather than a condition that might be treated. We have come to believe that a country of three hundred and forty million people simply cannot agree, when what is actually true is that we have built a machine that profits from our not agreeing and have mistaken its output for our own opinion.

The generation that read Paine’s pamphlet had every material reason to lose. They had no navy, no treasury, no manufacturing, and no experience of governing themselves. What they had was a decision.

We have every material advantage and no decision. That is a better problem to have, and it is an embarrassing one.

APPENDIX I. THE OBJECTIONS, AND WHAT I SAY TO THEM

A man who publishes his arguments and not the arguments against them is not reasoning; he is advertising. I have collected the strongest objections I know of, including several that I have not fully answered, and I put them here so that a reader may judge the case rather than the salesman.

“You are adding procedure to a government that is already dying of procedure.”

This is the most intelligent objection and I do not think I have entirely defeated it. Every mechanism I propose — guaranteed votes, budget corridors, automatic elections, independent scoring, expiring exceptions — is a new handle, and a new handle is a thing that a determined minority can seize. The argument that American government is paralyzed by an accumulation of individually reasonable procedures is correct, and I am proposing more procedure.

My answer is that not all procedure is alike. There is procedure that creates the ability to stop things, and procedure that creates the obligation to decide. Nearly everything strangling American government is the first kind. What I am proposing is the second: a rule that a bill must be voted on, a rule that a budget must be passed, a rule that failure has a date attached to it. But I concede that the distinction is cleaner in a pamphlet than it will be in a statute, and that the people who will draft the statute do this for a living and I do not.

“Your automatic election almost certainly requires amending the Constitution.”

Correct, and this is the largest practical problem in the whole document. Terms in the House are fixed at two years by Article One. Congress cannot dissolve a chamber by ordinary legislation. Even the mildest version of this idea — the old proposal that members should not be paid when they fail to pass a budget — collides with the Twenty-Seventh Amendment, which forbids changes to congressional pay from taking effect before an intervening election.

I have no clever escape. The automatic continuing resolution — the half that prevents shutdowns — can be done by statute tomorrow, and there is a bill for it. The election trigger cannot. I would rather name that plainly than let a reader discover it later and conclude I was hiding it.

“Open primaries do not work as well as you claim.”

Partly correct, and the evidence is genuinely mixed. Research finds newly elected members from nonpartisan-primary states score meaningfully less extreme than those from partisan-primary states, and a peer-reviewed study identifies the mechanism as deterrence — incumbents behave differently knowing a same-party challenger could face them before the whole electorate. But Berkeley researchers studying California's 2012 results found moderate candidates did not outperform, and a California review this June ran under the headline "Did it flop?"

I keep the proposal because the effect appears real and because margins compound over decades. But it is small to moderate at best, and I would rather say so than oversell it.

"Why not ranked ballots, as Alaska uses?"

I considered it seriously and moved off it for two reasons. The measured effect on polarization is thin — the National Conference of State Legislatures, which serves legislators of both parties in all fifty states, describes the research base as limited. And the durability is poor: Alaska adopted the system by about one point in 2020, nearly repealed it in 2024 by two-tenths of a point, and votes on repeal a third time this November. Nevada rejected a similar system in 2024.

A reform that has been on the ballot three times in six years in its only state is not one voters find obvious, and this document is called *Common Sense.* I have not abandoned the idea. I have demoted it to something worth testing at the state level, and I would treat Alaska's vote this November as the test. If it survives, the case strengthens. If it is repealed, that is information no study will give me.

"You are describing both parties as equally at fault, and they are not."

This one lands, and I want to be careful with it because the reflexive answer is dishonest.

The framework in this pamphlet is symmetric: both sides refuse to close deals, both benefit from the fight. But the clearest example I offered is not symmetric. The 2024 border bill collapsed because one party's leader publicly opposed it and the party followed, to the point that the bill's own Republican author voted against advancing it.

So: the *incentives* are symmetric. The machine rewards this behavior from anyone standing in front of it. The *specific instances* are not always symmetric, and a document that cannot say so about a particular case will read as evasion to anyone who watched that case happen. I hold to the structural claim. I withdraw any implication that every failure is evenly distributed.

"Where is redistricting? Where is the right to vote?"

A fair hit, and the gap in this pamphlet that I would most want filled by a better writer than me.

If a district is drawn so that the general election cannot be competitive, then reforming the primary is rearranging the furniture. Independent redistricting commissions are popular, have succeeded at the ballot box in several states, and pass my adversary test as cleanly as anything I have proposed — you would want a neutral map-drawer regardless of who is in power. It belongs in the first repair and it is not there. I can only say that I was trying to keep the list short and cut something I should have kept.

“Shifting retirement toward investment accounts means paying for two systems at once.”

True, and this is the objection that has killed every previous version of this idea, including the last serious attempt in 2005. It is arithmetic, not ideology.

Because the program is pay-as-you-go, money diverted into personal accounts is money that stops paying current retirees — who must still be paid, in full, for decades. For roughly a generation the country would carry both systems simultaneously. Phasing it in over decades reduces the annual burden without eliminating the total.

And I am proposing this alongside a binding limit on deficits, which means the transition has to be financed inside a budget I have just constrained. I have thought harder about this than about anything else in the pamphlet, and I think there is an answer, though it is not a free one.

The answer begins by refusing the move that has doomed every previous attempt. Do not divert the payroll taxes that are paying somebody’s grandmother this month. That is what makes the arithmetic impossible, and it is what killed the last serious effort in 2005. **Seed the accounts with new money and let them grow into the job instead.**

Once you do that, the single terrifying number resolves into three separate bills of very different character, and only one of them is large.

The first is the hole that already exists. The government has promised roughly thirty trillion dollars more in future retirement benefits than it has scheduled revenue to pay. That gap is there whether or not anyone reads this pamphlet. Reform does not create it. Reform drags it into the daylight, which is politically painful and fiscally honest, and it gets closed the ordinary way — by lifting the cap on the payroll tax, which is the most popular reform ever tested, and by trimming benefits at the top of the formula.

The second is the generation caught in the middle. Americans now between about thirty-five and sixty are too old for an account to compound into anything meaningful and too young to be left entirely alone. Getting that generation to a real floor costs something on the order of a trillion dollars. It is a large number and I will not dress it up. But it is paid once, and then it is finished, and part of it can come from outside the government altogether — wealthy Americans funding accounts in ordinary citizens' names under neutral rules, money that never passes through the Treasury and arrives as an asset rather than a program. I should be honest about how much that channel can carry: Americans gave six hundred and seventeen billion dollars to all charity last year, so a trillion over a decade would be a sixth of everything given to everything. Philanthropy plausibly carries a hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty billion of it, which would still be the largest private transfer to ordinary citizens this country has ever attempted. The rest is public money and I would rather say so than let someone else say it for me.

The third is every generation after that, and it is astonishingly cheap. Roughly three and a half million Americans are born each year. Ten thousand dollars for each of them is about thirty-six billion dollars a year — two-tenths of one percent of what the federal government spends — and ten thousand dollars left alone for sixty-five years becomes something in the neighborhood of eight hundred thousand. Then, for the cohorts who received a seeded account, the public promise is gradually reduced to match. Once those cohorts pass through, each generation arrives at retirement holding assets it owns rather than a claim on the paychecks of the generation behind it. The whole pay-as-you-go arrangement does not get paid off. **It stops existing.**

So the honest summary is this. **A trillion dollars closes the wound that the change opens. Thirty-six billion a year, kept up, is what stops the bleeding forever.** Both are worth doing, and the cheap one matters more.

"Higher returns in the stock market are not free money."

Correct, and it is important. Stocks return more than bonds over long periods precisely because they sometimes collapse. Over forty years this usually works out. But nobody retires on the average — a person retires on a particular date, and people who reached that date in 2000 or 2008 took losses they never made back.

This is why the accounts must grow automatically safer with age, and why the public floor beneath them is not decoration. It is the entire answer to this objection.

"If the government is directing trillions into the stock market, who decides what is in the index?"

A serious question with no fully satisfying answer yet. Pressure would come immediately to exclude firearms, or fossil fuels, or companies with disfavored labor practices or political donations, and the pressure would switch direction with each administration. Either that becomes an enormous new lever of political influence over private companies, or it requires governance rules durable enough that no administration can reach them. Nobody has yet demonstrated the latter. I would want it solved before the accounts grow large, not after.

"Student-debt relief while preaching fiscal discipline is a contradiction."

That objection was decisive against blanket cancellation, and the proposal has changed. Existing borrowers now receive credit for good-faith payment, protection from runaway interest during reasonable income-based repayment, and closure after a fixed term - not an immediate erasure of every balance. Future lending is tied to repayment outcomes, and colleges share the losses their programs create. Someone who repaid a loan or chose a trade is no longer being asked to finance an unlimited cancellation while institutions walk away untouched.

“A budget rule will just produce accounting tricks.”

Every country that has adopted one has discovered this. Once a number is binding, the fight moves to what counts. Spending goes off-budget, gets relabeled as investment, becomes a tax expenditure, or turns into an unfunded mandate on states. Forecasts become optimistic in exact proportion to how much they need to be.

This is why independent scoring is not a technical footnote in my proposal. Without it the rule is theater, and I would honestly rather have no rule than one that makes lying easier.

“There is no constituency for any of this.”

The most damning objection, because it is about power rather than merit, and merit has never been sufficient.

No Labels approached thirty candidates and got thirty refusals. Structural reform has no donor base, no organized bloc of voters, and no incumbent whose career it advances. Each individual repair here has a different coalition — the stock ban unites Hawley and Ossoff, ownership accounts unite venture capitalists and populists, fiscal rules unite deficit hawks — and those coalitions barely overlap and in several cases actively dislike each other.

The bundle is what makes the argument coherent and what makes it hard to pass. I do not have a clean answer. My working thought is that the path runs through states and through individual reforms winning on their own merits, rather than through a national moment. But I hold that loosely, and if someone has a better theory I would rather hear it than defend mine.

APPENDIX II. A RECKONING OF THE BOOKS

Paine ended his pamphlet by counting ships and pricing timber, on the theory that a proposal without arithmetic is a wish. Here is the arithmetic, as plainly as I can set it down. Every figure comes from the Congressional Budget Office or the trustees of the Social Security program.

What the country owes. Federal debt held by the public: about 101 percent of a year's total national output, projected to reach 120 percent within ten years. The previous record was 106 percent, set in 1946, immediately after a world war.

What the debt costs. Roughly $1 trillion a year in interest, rising toward $2.1 trillion by 2036.

Where the deficit comes from. Total deficit this year: 5.8 percent of the economy. Deficit excluding interest: 2.6 percent, and projected to stay below that for a decade.

Which means: interest exceeds everything else in the deficit put together. The largest single thing the federal government does with borrowed money is service previous borrowing.

When retirement runs short. The Social Security retirement trust fund is depleted in 2032. At that point income covers 78 percent of promised benefits. The combined funds, including disability, last until 2034 at 83 percent.

Who lives longer. Between the 1930 and 1960 birth cohorts, men in the top two income groups gained seven to eight years of life expectancy at fifty. Men in the bottom two gained little or none.

What raising the retirement age would do. Moving it from 67 to 70 reduces lifetime benefits by roughly 25 percent for the poorest men and 20 percent for the wealthiest, widening the lifetime gap between them by about $130,000.

What the public thinks about congressional stock trading. 86 percent in favor of a ban. 87 percent of Republicans, 88 percent of Democrats, 81 percent of independents.

What Congress produced. A bill permitting members to sell existing holdings, tied to an unrelated voter-identification measure, passed 232–198 on 22 July 2026.

What we misjudge. Partisans estimate that 55 percent of the other side holds extreme views. The measured figure is about 30.

I set these down together because the argument of this pamphlet is not really in any single one of them. It is in the fact that all of these are known, none are secret, most are decades old, and nothing follows.

HOW WE WILL KNOW IF IT WORKED

Any argument like this one should be falsifiable. If a movement can’t say in advance what success looks like, it will always be able to claim it afterward.

So here are eight numbers, grouped by whether they test the failure itself or one of the two mechanisms that produce it. They’re published every year by people with no stake in this document, and they’re hard to fake.

There is no deadline column, on purpose. A date invites delay — put 2046 on a page and everyone relaxes until 2044. Several of these could be done inside a decade if anyone wanted them badly enough, and none of them require a generation. The last column is simply **Done?** It stays empty until it isn’t.

The one number worth explaining before you read it: the target for competitive House seats is 150, not 435. Americans have sorted themselves geographically, and even a perfectly neutral map leaves Manhattan and rural Wyoming uncompetitive. A third of the House genuinely in play would be a transformation.

The failure — nobody closes a deal

Measure	Now	Target	Done?
5. People here long-term without legal status	11M	Under 1M	
6. Cents of each federal tax dollar eaten by interest	19¢	Under 10¢	
7. Americans over 50 with no retirement savings at all	20%	Under 5%	
8. Americans on track to keep their standard of living in retirement	61%	90%	

Cause one — most of us don’t vote in the election that decides the seat

Measure	Now	Target	Done?
1. States with an open primary *and* an independent map commission	1	50	
2. House seats where November is genuinely in doubt, of 435	18	150	

Cause two — self-dealing is legal

Measure	Now	Target	Done?
3. Members of Congress and families trading individual stocks	Legal	Banned	

Measure	Now	Target	Done?
4. Budgets passed on time, of the last 20 years	0	20	

Measure five is met by legalizing the people already here and controlling entry going forward. If it is ever met by removing eleven million people instead, the reform failed and something worse replaced it.

Measures seven and eight are deliberately a pair. The first asks whether we lifted the floor. The second asks whether we lifted anyone above it — because a person with a hundred dollars saved is off the first list and still facing an old age they can't afford.

Sources: Ballotpedia and state election offices (1); Cook Political Report (2); congressional ethics filings (3); Congressional Research Service (4); DHS and Pew (5); Congressional Budget Office and Treasury (6); Federal Reserve and AARP (7); Center for Retirement Research at Boston College, National Retirement Risk Index (8).

A CLOSING WORD

I want to say what this is not, because it will be misread otherwise.

This is not a party document. It contains proposals that will infuriate the left and proposals that will infuriate the right, and if you have read it and found nothing that annoyed you, I have failed. It is not a manifesto for a movement, and I am not asking for anyone's allegiance. I am not a politician, and I am not in a position to enact a syllable of it.

It is an argument, offered to be tested. If you find an error, I would rather hear it than not.

But I will end where the original ended, in the only register the subject deserves.

Every generation of Americans has been handed a country and asked to hand on something at least as good. That obligation is not sentimental. It is the actual deal, the one thing that has been continuously agreed upon here for two hundred and fifty years, through a civil war and two world wars and a depression and a great deal of shameful behavior in between.

We are, at present, failing to keep it. Not spectacularly — no cataclysm, no collapse, nothing that would make a good film. We are failing quietly, by deferral, handing our children a larger bill and a weaker instrument every year, and telling ourselves that the other half of the country is at fault.

The machine that produces this result was not designed by anyone. It emerged, from a series of reasonable decisions, over a long period, and nobody chose it. Which means nobody is defending it on the merits, because it has no merits, because it was never argued for in the first place.

That is a hopeful thing, properly understood. **An arrangement nobody chose can be unchosen.** It requires no revolution, no violence, no new philosophy, and no one to change their deepest beliefs. It requires only that enough people say, out loud and at the same time, that the thing does not work and that we are no longer going to pretend it does.

A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right. That was true of hereditary monarchy in 1776 and it is true of what we have now.

We have it in our power to begin the world over again. That was an extravagant claim when it was written, and it turned out to be true. What I am asking is far smaller. I am asking that a country capable of extraordinary things become capable, once more, of ordinary ones — of passing a budget, of keeping its own house honest, of closing a deal that nearly everyone already wants.

That should not require courage. That it does is the measure of how far we have drifted.

Written in the two hundred and fiftieth year of American independence.

CommonSenseAgain.org

The framing of the two parties — one that feels and cannot build, one that builds and does not feel — I owe to a formulation of Mark Cuban's, which described my own view better than I had been describing it. The italicized phrases echoing the original are Thomas Paine's, and are used in tribute. Figures are drawn from the Congressional Budget Office, the Social Security trustees, the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland, More in Common, and the Congressional Research Service. Every number here can be checked, and I hope it will be.

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1. North Dakota HB 1297, signed 15 April 2025, prohibiting ranked-choice and approval voting statewide and ending Fargo's use of approval voting, which had been adopted by ballot measure in 2018. Source: Ballotpedia.
2. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *St. Louis American*, on the Board of Aldermen repeal bill led by Alderman Sharon Tyus with the support of Aldermanic President Lewis Reed and members of the aldermanic African American caucus. The vote-dilution argument is the sponsors' own.
3. Ballotpedia: thirteen states had banned ranked-choice voting as of March 2025; statewide measures were rejected in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada and Oregon in 2024, and Missouri approved a constitutional prohibition. Alaska's repeal failed 50.1%–49.9% and a further repeal is on the 2026 ballot. Nonpartisan.
4. National Conference of State Legislatures, "Coping with Term Limits," and research on institutional knowledge and budgeting in term-limited legislatures summarized by the MOST Policy Initiative. NCSL is bipartisan. Some researchers dispute the magnitude of the lobbyist effect, noting that lobbyists must also win over each incoming class. Congressional term limits would further require a constitutional amendment — *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton*, 514 U.S. 779 (1995).