



Sen. Bernie Sanders

State of the Union Contest 2015

Sen. Bernie Sanders' annual State of the Union essay contest, now in its fifth year, is an opportunity for Vermont students to articulate what issues they would prioritize, if they were president. A panel of Vermont teachers judged the essays, selecting the top 20 essays. More than 400 students wrote essays for this year's essay contest. The following 20 essays have been entered into the congressional record to honor the accomplishments of the students.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Leo Lehrer-Small, Mount Mansfield Union High School (Winner)

As we enter the year of 2015, there is one issue in particular that our government, in conjunction with global policy makers, need to address with attention and urgency. This issue, quite simply, is the safety of our planet: global climate change is already affecting the environment through droughts, increasingly frequent heat waves, and rising sea levels. It is a scientific fact that climate change is man-made, even though some politicians still deny the part that humans play in the issue.

As the most powerful country in the world, the US must be a driving force in halting global climate change. The question is: how do we go about doing this? In order to fix our growing crisis, we must first understand the roots of the problem. Last year's report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change showed that the recent rise of temperature is due to an excess of greenhouse gases that humans have released into our atmosphere. And to quote the Environmental Protection Agency, "The largest source of greenhouse gas emissions from human activities in the United States is from burning fossil fuels for electricity, heat, and transportation." So it is clear; the root of our problem is our overuse of fossil fuels.

We must take drastic measures to reduce our fossil fuel consumption. Congress must make and pass bills that finance green energy projects. Government subsidies which are currently being given to the oil and gas industries should be given to the renewable energy industry. This boost would allow renewable and clean energy sources such as wind and solar to provide more of the nation's energy, and in return lower our usage of fossil fuels. The growth of clean energy usage in the US would not only play a role in climate change reversal, but also provide millions of safe jobs for American workers.

Furthermore, our government should heavily tax the large greenhouse gas producers; companies that burn cheap fossil fuels to make massive amounts of money. These are the main contributors to climate change. These are the corporations that we must limit through a tax on carbon dioxide. Such a tax would not only discourage the burning of fossil fuels, but the money may also be invested in the redevelopment of clean energy.

And as one of the leaders in our global economy, the rest of the world will look to us to initiate the transition towards clean energy usage. We have the opportunity to globally legitimize renewable energy, which is a vital step towards ending climate change. The action that our country takes on this problem will be a model for the rest of the world, which makes it the most important issue that should be addressed by the United States. Not taking care of the planet is not taking care of the people.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Ryan Taggard, Brattleboro Union High School (Second Place)

The state of our country has seen marked improvement over the last year. Unemployment is at its lowest level since before the recession, the stock market is setting record highs, and a manufacturing sector that has added jobs for the first time in nearly two decades. But we're working to regain lost ground, while neglecting the importance of innovating, creating, and aspiring – the very aspects that once made our country great.

Throughout the 60's and 70's, America was the planet's premier superpower. Despite the threat of an aggressive U.S.S.R. looming on the horizon, campus unrest, the conflict in Vietnam, and the civil rights movement playing out in confrontations on the street, we found time to dream about tomorrow. The engine of this growth was the relentless advancement of science and technology. Our crowned jewel, NASA, was among the most powerful agencies the world had ever seen, and promised us a future full of plenty. We didn't outsource jobs, because no other nation could do what America could. We spawned entire industries built around new inventions. And most importantly, we gained a technological edge, strengthening our military, infrastructure, and economy.

MRIs, GPS receivers, cochlear implants, Lasik surgery, catalytic converters, the first fuel cells, cordless tools, cell phones, and the microprocessors that enable our lives are all direct results of our first forays into the abyss of space. Due to our curiosity, hundreds of thousands of lives were saved. Patients who were born deaf were given the ability to hear. The blind could see. The environment was restored in numerous and invaluable ways, and communication became constant and universal. Curiosity enabled our nation to perform miracles.

Unfortunately for our nation, NASA was formed in the midst of a panic induced by the launch of the Soviet's Sputnik. Once the American government saw that the U.S.S.R. wasn't ready to go to the moon, they ceded their push to move forwards. Today NASA's spending represents 0.49% of our federal budget. This half a penny off the tax dollar pays for all of NASA's operations: the International Space Station, Hubble telescope, Curiosity rover, all the astronauts, and more. With only a slight increase in funding, we could go back to the moon, send men to Mars, and journey on to explore asteroids and alien worlds.

The incentives for raising NASA's budget are diverse, powerful, and irrespective of party. As well as providing an opportunity for our government to assume a leadership position, the economic stimulus that accompanies a revived space industry would create new jobs, the technologies developed would improve our lives, and the cultural shift that occurred in the 60's and 70's would once again become the norm. Students would aspire to become scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and technologists. We as a nation would reclaim our former spot at the very forefront of innovation. And America would reap the benefits of an educated, industrial, and forward thinking workforce.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Hadley Menk, Champlain Valley Union High School (Third Place)

The future of our great nation is being threatened at this very moment, and the foe may not be what you suspect. The current states of our agricultural practices are harming our country's future in catastrophic ways. Before a country can focus on issues like health care, gun control, abortion, or even the functioning of its own government, it must make sure the people's basic needs are met. And nothing is more basic or essential than food.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that the world's population will reach 9 billion people within the next 40 years. To meet this need, global agricultural production must increase by 70%. Elected officials of the United States must take this seriously. Fortunately, agriculture is a subject in which Vermont is well versed. It is time for Vermont to lead the way in advocating for more efficient, effective, and sustainable agriculture. Investing in agriculture is one of the simplest but most effective ways for the United States to protect its future as a nation and as a world leader.

There are several interconnected issues currently facing our agriculture industry, the most important of which are affordability, water, and land management. Food prices tend to fluctuate depending on the price of oil, as petroleum products are widely used in almost all aspects of food production. From trucks and equipment to synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, petroleum plays too large a role in our food. Emphasis must be placed on finding more natural alternatives to petroleum. Water and land management are also major issues. As is evidenced by the crisis in California, more needs to be done in terms of finding ways to better conserve water for agriculture. According to the Index Mundi, in North America in 1961, the amount of arable land per person was 1.1 hectares. In 2009, that number had decreased to .61 per person, due to land misuse. Legislators on a local, state, and national level need to work with scientists to solve these potentially catastrophic problems.

Without agriculture, it is impossible for any country to survive. Widespread food shortages can cause not only starvation but also corruption in the government. Investing in food production benefits everyone, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or political party, and yet agriculture is not treated with as much attention as issues like gun control and immigration in the media.

In order to preserve the future of the United States, we as Vermonters must lead the way in urging legislators to endorse measures that will improve agricultural methods and help farmers be more sustainable. In a letter to George Washington dated August 14, 1787, Thomas Jefferson stated that "Agriculture... is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals and happiness."

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Craig Pelsor, Milton High School (Third Place)

The United States of America is without a doubt in a better position now than it was ten years ago. The economy has rebounded and the few lingering effects of the “Great Recession” are being mended. The national unemployment rate stands at 5.9% as of September, the lowest it's been since 2008. The United States is producing more oil, natural gas and energy from renewable resources than ever before, which seeks to further the eventual dream of an energy independent America. In addition, rates for violent and property crimes continue to decline and our national GDP continues to outpace every other nations.

Even with the future seeming so bright, there remains still pressing issues to which we must give our full attention.

As the economy has recovered and grown, so has the gap between the rich and the poor, and even the rich and the super-rich. We hear of the wealthiest one percent's still growing fortunes while those in the 30th or 10th percentile are still waiting for the wealth to trickle down. That has not worked, and we must do something to stem the tide of this growing inequality. To do this we must raise the minimum wage until it is a livable wage in all fifty states, as well as reorganizing our tax structure so that those with the most wealth are contributing more than those without. There is also the issue of massive student loan debts which dampen the potential success of graduates. With the average student loan debt growing, there are a number of steps we could take to make paying for higher education less of a financial burden. Expand the federal student loan program to grant more money to those who need it, while at the same time ensuring public colleges and universities do not raise their tuitions. The system of federally subsidized Universities used in Canada and some European nations could easily be adopted in the United States in order to keep the working costs of our colleges and universities at a level where they will not need to raise their tuition costs every year.

On a global front, there continues the troubles in the Middle East and abroad, for which America has a duty to respond with both humanitarian aid and military force to ensure a lasting peace in the region. The arming of so called “moderate” rebels in conflicts in Syria have proven of little aid to America or its interests as well as the weapons and intelligence we provide ending up in unintended hands. Also, the billions of dollars of military aid to countries such as Israel which has become a massively unnecessary expenditure. In light of this, America should adopt a renewed focus on bettering education opportunities and the general standards of living in the Middle East and avoid joining any new conflicts. The containment and destruction of ISIS should remain a top priority, although the commitment of ground troops to the area should be withheld unless the situation gets far worse.

A chasm of trust has grown between American citizens and those put in charge of their protection, law enforcement, due to a lack of transparency and discretion. To that end, the United States government must provide the states with incentive to equip local law enforcement with things such as body cameras instead of armored vehicles and assault rifles, as well as further training in dealing with the mentally ill and minorities where it is most needed. Until the people feel like police officers are being held accountable for their actions, we cannot expect to further improve the nation.

Another small change which may help stem the continuing rise in prescription drug abuse would be the outlawing of television, radio and internet advertising for all prescription drugs. With this people will be less likely to believe that they need all of the drugs that they see on television and that they are all safe because they are being publicly advertised.

There is no one solution to all the nation's problems, but through many small steps and congressional efforts like the ones that I have mentioned can make the United States of America a much stronger and prosperous nation.

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Sam Anglum, Burr and Burton Academy (Finalist)

We marched along for roughly 5 miles, part of which was right through Times Square. While holding up our signs and chanting what we wanted to see change in our government's priorities, I looked to my left and gazed at the skyline full of skyscrapers atop the canopy of Central Park.

My class and I were marching alongside 400,000 New Yorkers, Americans, and globally aware citizens at the 2014 NYC Climate March. Climate change is a very serious issue that not many people are sensitive enough about. My hopes going into the march were to be a part of bringing global awareness to the massive shift in attitude I feel is going to save the Earth from its imminent doom.

After participating in such a momentous event, I want my voice to echo further than the streets of Manhattan. I want the United States government to consider helping by promoting climate education in schools across the nation so that this kind of action becomes a part of the everyday agenda. As a high school student in Vermont, I urge my very own state senators including Governor Shumlin to consider spreading this type of education across the State of Vermont. I imagine the future generations as the key components to setting goals and battling for solutions to the problems that people are fighting against today.

Not everyone will be an activist, or even care nearly as much as they should, but as long as more of the youth is aware of these pressing global issues, the amount of people that will create change will no doubt be multiplied. Our world's economic foundation is based on the over-extraction of fossil fuels, and because of this one in four carbon emissions comes from humans. I am aware that Vermont has a goal of making restrictions on fossil fuels and ultimately becoming 90 percent renewable by 2050. Every student in Vermont should be aware of this goal. I strongly urge the United States government to contribute to that further by promoting this kind of discussion within classrooms.

New York City Councilman Donovan Richards, a man on the panel for 350.org, spoke to us the night before the march, and his words stuck with me. "Rulership does not coincide with leadership." The streets of Manhattan were full of leaders on Sunday, September 21, and our desire was to influence our rulers. However, if our voice is transmitted to our "rulers" such as yourself, our governments can "lead" us into a more sustainable and renewable world.

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Caroline Arthaud, Champlain Valley Union High School (Finalist)

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, and fellow Americans:

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in." At this time, it is my duty to lead this country towards such a place. I stand here today to address our successes, but also our deficits. Although Americans have many reasons to be proud of our accomplishments, it is unrealistic and inaccurate to declare ourselves flawless. We must muster the courage to confront the issues that hold us back.

Although the unemployment rate has decreased from 9.7 percent in 2010 to 5.8 percent in November of 2014, there are still 9 million Americans without jobs. This is not acceptable.

Beyond this, our precious environment is deteriorating. What many seem to struggle to understand is that the gradual warming of the earth is not an issue affecting only polar bears and penguins, but a growing danger to humans, as well.

To begin to address issues of unemployment and environment, it is important that we, the American people, do our part to raise awareness and call for action. America needs to initiate large-scale production of renewable energy sources. This will help us in two ways: it will expand employment and create new jobs, and it will also transition this country from dependence on pollution-causing energy sources to cleaner solutions. We can sleep easier knowing that we have stopped engaging in a process sure to leave our children and grandchildren with a world too far gone to rehabilitate.

Yet, another issue has escalated severely in recent years. It is one that has resulted in the violent deaths of 20 innocent six-year-olds in 2012, and that continues to take the lives of an average of 289 Americans daily. Many of us don't want to look at the problem of gun violence, but it has become something we can no longer ignore. We must formulate legislation that demands the renewal of gun permits on a regular basis, and work to improve the quality of mental health treatment. We must insist upon implementing stricter background checks on anyone wishing to bear weapons.

Change is difficult. It's difficult on an individual basis, and vastly more difficult on a national one. However, I believe that the ability to change is a big part of what has made this nation so great. Americans are resilient and creative, and I believe that if we set our minds to it, we can improve the state of our union. I call upon you, all of you, to help continue the legacy of this remarkable country by working with me to better the lives of all Americans. Unemployment, environmental degradation, and gun violence are a lot to take on; however, we live in a country capable of anything.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

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Har Wa Bi, Winooski High School (Finalist)

“There is a lot that happens around the world we cannot control. We cannot stop earthquakes, we cannot prevent droughts, and we cannot prevent all conflict, but when we know where the hungry, the homeless and the sick exist, then we can help,” says Jan Schakowsky, the U.S. Representative from Illinois. We can't help what nature creates, but being homeless is not nature. It is produced by humans and only humans can erase it. It is our nation's fault for letting people become homeless and live in poverty. We need to help the homeless and not let the poor become homeless.

According to studentsagainsthunger.org in United States, each year more than 3.5 million people become homeless. They are forced to sleep in parks, under bridges, in shelters or cars. In fact, 35 percent of the homeless population are families with children, which is the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. And, 25 percent of the homeless population suffer from some form of mental illness. According to feedingamerica.org, 45.3 percent of the people lived in poverty in 2013. This included 26.4 million people ages 18 to 64, 4.7 million children under the age of 18, and 4.2 million seniors 65 and older.

I believe poverty happens in the United States because housing and hospital bills are too expensive. Lower-income workers cannot afford food and shelter. After we pay for housing, nothing is left for us. We don't have a higher income, we have food stamps which are low because the government cut it off it, including for my family. And, my mom is the only one who works. According to homeaid.org, some part of the homelessness is caused by the loss of loved ones, job loss, domestic violence, divorce and family disputes. Other impairments such as depression, untreated mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, and physical disabilities are also responsible for a large portion of the homeless. I want government to help those people who need and try to stop from it happening, and to make our nation become better.

I believe only government can decrease homelessness and help to increase the income, which all poor people need. We need to decrease the cost of hospitals or anything that costs a lot. Please help us poor and homeless because the government is our only hope. We will be waiting for the results of our government's actions.

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Peter Camardo, South Burlington High School (Finalist)

A democracy is a government ruled by the people. In a democracy, the citizens hold the responsibility of making decisions. This is why United States of America has been successful throughout history. A democracy is the most productive way to run society when its citizens are engaged, but it loses its superiority when the population is plagued by ignorance.

In my lifetime, Americans have been fortunate to live on our homeland without major threat to our national security. We have grown accustomed to lives of guaranteed safety. Unfortunately with this privilege, we have begun to feel entitled and to neglect our responsibility as American citizens. Issues of great concern are being ignored by the American population as if they mean nothing. Americans are sitting back and waiting for others to take action while grave matters are left undebated by the American public. I think back to President Kennedy's inaugural speech, and when he said the famous words, "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." It is important that we American citizens remind ourselves of these words in everything we do, and to remember that our government is built upon the strong, independent voices that make up a democracy.

I don't believe there is one significant issue concerning the United States that is more urgent than the rest. Each issue we face is vital for our nation to address appropriately. Regardless of which issue we undertake at which time, the first step to solving it is to become educated, and to stop ignoring problems just because they are not affecting us directly. All the members of a democracy must understand a conflict before it can be solved. In an age where people have infinite information at their fingertips, it can be easy to lose sight of important information. We must be educated before we can solve our issues of today.

The responsibility to educate the public lies with the elected members of our government. It is important for our government to be straightforward and honest. It is important that when there are protests and movements the voices of the American people are heard and represented. Most importantly, the United States Congress should set an example for leadership and communication, and should inspire the people of the United States through proactive legislation and positive inter-party communication.

We are the greatest nation on earth. We are far too experienced and wise to get caught up in a bipartisan conflict. When we get caught up in a battle with ourselves, it dejects us. The reason why the citizens of America have lost a sense of American pride is because our leaders seem to have lost a sense of purpose. The objective of our government is to, "Establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity," and the government should put aside their personal beliefs in an effort to make that happen.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Taylor Devaney, Missisquoi Valley Union High School (Finalist)

President Obama once said that, "The nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous", and as a young Vermonter, I agree with this statement. I am concerned with the state of our union due to the ever-growing, unequal wealth distribution. As the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and in many situations wealth distribution gets ignored. The middle class population used to be the backbone of the nation, but every year it gets harder to make ends meet, as they slide lower down the economic class scale. America leads the world in the widest gap between the have and have nots, making the idea of America being the land of opportunity seem more of an unlikely dream.

The most recent studies from the Federal Reserve show that a mere 3 percent of American families own 54 percent of the wealth in the United States. The unbalanced wealth distribution is dangerous for the nation as a whole. Economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman state that in their research that the wealth distribution has grown to the same levels as in the 1920's. The top 1 percent owns upwards of 40 percent of the wealth in the United States. As a nation, we have experienced the disastrous effects of an economic crash during the Great Depression, due to unbalanced wealth. We as a nation have failed to learn from our mistakes and are continuing down a dangerous path. The middle class is still at risk for being hurt the most, as they are left to clean up the mess of the high rollers. An unfair task when their wages remain stagnant, as the profits and wages soar for those at the top of the corrupted corporate ladder. The hard working American people do not deserve to struggle and something must be done.

The mega-rich are not paying appropriate amount of taxes for their wealth, making the middle and lower class make up for the difference. Many of the people who control the tax rates are also the ones who make the most. Members of Congress are creating laws to benefit themselves. Big money and government fit together well, for politicians look for the wealthy to support them financially.

We can no longer only provide for wealthy men and women who indirectly control our government. Creating a scaled taxation system will help balance the wealth in the nation. Making sure the wealth are paying their fair share is key to balancing out our nation's prosperity. The U.S. can take note from the most famous, and down to Earth business from Vermont, Ben & Jerry's. This company had a system of a pay ratio between the highest paid employee and the lowest paid employee of 5 to 1 in its early years. These numbers are relatively small, but scaling them could make an impact on businesses today. Unequal wealth distribution benefits only a small portion of the country and will be the cause of a failed economy.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Connor Drown, Winooski High School (Finalist)

America. Home of the brave and land of the free. It is at its heart known as a free country, with opportunity just waiting for someone to snatch it up for themselves. It is a land where one desires the "American Dream." Unfortunately, this is not remotely possible, and many citizens of the United States have difficulties living in this country. The United States of America is a great country to live in, if not the best, but is also far from perfect.

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

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

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

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

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

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Spencer Eckert, Woodstock Union High School (Finalist)

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

There are a number of compelling reasons to increase the minimum wage. Let's begin with the economy. It's simple; raising the minimum wage would have a positive effect on the economy by giving workers more money to spend. It would be good to raise the minimum wage to \$15 because there would be more money being pumped into the economy. If workers get paid more, then they are happier and with a better mood they will want to spend more. It gives people the confidence to spend more and when they spend more they are fueling the economy. "A raise for minimum wage earners will put more money in more families' pockets, which will be spent on goods and services, stimulating economic growth locally and nationally," according to the "Minimum Wage Mythbusters."

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

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

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

Another reason why the minimum wage should be increased to \$15 is because of the positive psychological benefits. It would raise people's self-esteem and self-worth and would also allow children in these poverty-level homes to have better opportunities in the future. If these children

are able to improve their performance in school, than they are likely to continue education which would allow them to pursue better paying jobs in the future. If they have better paying jobs, they are no longer on government programs and they have the opportunity and confidence to spend money which fuel the economy. It is a positive cycle. “A raise in the minimum wage would not only help many families escape or avoid poverty, but could also significantly boost their children’s academic performance and future adult earnings,” said Yannet M. Lathrop, a Policy Analyst who has conducted studies on raising the minimum wage.

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

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Jacob Gallow, Missisquoi Valley Union High School (Finalist)

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

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

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

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

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

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Liam Gibbons, Milton High School (Finalist)

We learn in school and from our parents that America is the land of opportunity. Yet that is not the case. When the wealth gap is steadily increasing, as women earn 70 cents for each dollar a man makes, as the U.S. government spends more on defense than on its disenfranchised, the land of opportunity seems no longer under boot, but instead a distant reality. Equal protection under the laws for every citizen, promoting the general welfare, rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. All of these things are printed on our country's most sacred documents, these things which need to be an attainable reality for every American.

Perhaps one of the most egregiously neglected groups in the U.S. is women. Wage inequality combined with the control of their own bodies in the hands of the government all add to the fact that women are among the most disparaged people within the U.S. Throughout America, women are denied the right to a safe and constitutional abortion. Some of the biggest contenders for the presidency have voiced their belief that women shouldn't have this constitutional right even in the context of rape or incest. Because of *Roe v. Wade*, because of its constitutionality, a safe abortion should be as accessible to the women in Texas as much as the women in Vermont.

A law needs to standardize how abortion clinics are made and run, and if there is an issue regarding states' rights and federalism, then an amendment must be made. Because not only are women not currently in control of their own bodies, they also lack the ability to earn equal wages as men. In 1977, the Equal rights amendment lost by the votes of three states. Who in their right minds would vote against equal rights in 2015. In order to ensure true equality and civil rights bring back the ERA, and this time ratify it.

Another group of people who lack this promised opportunity is the poor. Most Americans are employed, but many of them aren't earning livable wages. An American shouldn't have to work three jobs to support their family. An American shouldn't have to ride a bus three hours a day in order to work for privatized welfare. An American should be able to work for 40 hours a week, and be able to live comfortably. And this is possible if we raise the minimum wage so that it equates to a livable wage. However, no American should not have to strive for the minimum, each citizen should have a chance at exceeding, each American should be able to go to college.

In Germany, in Sweden, in Norway college is free. In Syria, a week of bombing by the U.S. costs the same as the tuition of 40,000 American students. If we were to take a fraction of our defense budget and give it to the impoverished for higher education, if we were to reallocate the budget, we would be seeing a lot more opportunity.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Eli Hulse, Vermont Commons School (Finalist)

As the United States moves into 2015, we have achieved many things that have furthered the nation, and improved the security of the people economically, socially, and militarily. Some of these advancements include electing Janet Yellen as the first female Chair of the Federal Reserve, reducing the unemployment rate from 6.7 percent to 5.8 percent; the lowest it has been since 2008, and helping foreign forces fight against the militant group ISIS. However, there are many problems that the United States faces and needs to address over the next year.

The single most important issue that the United States needs to recognize and correct is the disparity of income. Although it is true that the gap in income causes problems with equality between the social classes, there are concerns that the percentage of income that the upper class has is causing instability in the United States economy as a whole. People who have more money do not spend as much of percentage of it as poorer people, which means that that money sits in savings accounts, and is not paid to businesses in return for products. As the income gap widens, less money will be introduced into the economy, and it will leave the economy in a precarious position.

Another serious issue that the United States needs to address is the spread of Ebola in Africa. Although domestic cases of Ebola have been isolated and treated, an unstable Africa would allow Ebola to potentially spread to the United States and other countries, and could be catastrophic. It is important that the United States government continues its support of Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and other countries that are struggling to create the infrastructure to treat this deadly disease.

Finally, it is key that the United States continues its resistance to terror threats both domestically and internationally. Although currently not a direct threat to the United States or to the general populous, ISIS has the potential to cause great damage to the European Union and eventually to the United States. A military force this size has not been seen in a long time, and the influence that it has in the countries it overtakes is alarming and needs to be kept in check. The United States needs to keep this in mind when making international policy decisions, and needs to continue supporting countries that are actively fighting ISIS.

The United States continues to be one of the largest influencers on the international playing field. However, policy makers need to keep in mind many domestic problems, and begin working across the aisle in order to keep the government of the United States secure and capable. 2014 has seen a whole array of new policies, and these policies have ensured the security of the American people. In 2015, new policies will be created, that will hopefully fix some of the problems in our society. God bless the United States of America.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Kathy Joseph, Champlain Valley Union High School (Finalist)

America has undoubtedly grown in the past year, but the many problems plaguing our nation continue to persist. The United States economy is stronger. We added 300 thousand jobs in November, the best in nearly three years. The unemployment rate is at 5.8%, a post-recession low point. President Obama struck a climate change deal with China- the two countries with the largest energy consumptions agreed to curb their carbon emissions by 2030. The war on terror in Afghanistan officially ended. Relations with Cuba have been reopened, which will make educational travel to Cuba easier and is a new approach to dealing with the oppressive regime that is currently leading Cuba.

All of these are steps America has taken in the past year in the right direction. However, we still face many challenges. The US has a growing income gap- the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. This is highlighted in the spending bill passed in December to prevent the government shutdown. In it there were several provisions to cut welfare spending, such as Medicare and spending on the Women and Children support while there was another provision essentially written by the banks to reverse the Dodd Frank act. That act was written after the recession, but now things will go back to the way they were. Lobbyists for banks and for the wealthy have louder voices in Washington. Over 50% of Congress people are millionaires, while millionaires make up only 5% of the US population. This helps explain why income inequality is only getting worse, and is something that the American people must change.

It is harder for students to afford college. Student loans are not of importance in Washington, which is something that needs to be changed. More people are afraid of the debt they will be in after getting their degree, and would rather start working out of high school. This is not the path we should be going on, and it is time for Congress to start listening to the students and prioritizing education.

The media have recently brought the nation's attention to police brutality, racial discrimination, and our broken criminal justice system. President Obama allocated \$263 million for police body cameras and training, which is an acknowledgement of the need for reform but does not solve the root problem. Although there was footage available for the strangling of Eric Garner, the officer had no charges filed against him. These injustices seem to be occurring only more frequently, and Congress should focus its attention on real solutions that will lead to demilitarization of the police and a stop to the criminal justice system disproportionately affecting minority groups.

We are still moving forward as a nation, but in 2015 we must work to reverse trends such as the growing income gap, increased police brutality, and losing sight of our priorities. There is still hope for a brighter future if we remember what values America really stands for.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Emily (Emery) Mead, Missisquoi Valley Union High School (Finalist)

As a young Vermonter, just getting ready to begin my college journey, there are some concerns that trouble me most about the future of our country. Please consider my advice as you prepare your address on the state of our union. My main concern is about how the transgender community is treated in America. Things have gotten better for them, but there's still quite a bit of discrimination against transgender people. Many people don't think trans folk deserve rights, but they're still just humans. I am a part of this community so I know about its difficulties personally. I am physically female but I identify as male.

One of the difficulties I have is the bathrooms and I'm not the only one, it's one of the biggest problems for us. I am literally terrified to go to the bathroom at school and in other public places because I use the men's bathroom and every time I do I'm afraid I will be ridiculed or kicked out and have been confronted by kids telling me to stay out of the guys bathroom at school. No one should be afraid to pee.

I don't have it that bad, for some people it's a lot worse. A friend of mine came out as transgender to his family and they kicked him out and disowned him. Luckily he has a very supporting girlfriend who he's currently living with and good friends who helped him with his struggles. Some people don't have that kind of support. Some are kicked out of their houses or run away from abusive families to live on the dirty streets and beg for money to pay for food or to buy a blanket to keep them warm on cold nights. An article about gay and transgender youth homelessness on americanprogress.org gives these stats which I have paraphrased; There is an estimated 1.6 million to 2.8 million homeless youth in the United States; 20 to 40 percent of that are gay or transgender kids; an estimated 320,000 to 400,000 gay and transgender youth are facing homelessness each year. Some are lucky enough to find a shelter or housing for transgender people, but not everyone lives near one or knows about one near them. It's not right for these kids to have no place to sleep.

These problems are very serious and need to be addressed and fixed. A possible solution for the bathroom problem is to fund more unisex bathrooms in more public places; I strongly believe this will help reduce the awkwardness and fear of going to the bathroom; even for those who are just uncomfortable with using public bathrooms. As for the shelter problem, putting more of these shelters around the country and making them more advertised and well known these kids won't be forced to live on the streets anymore.

Thank you for your consideration.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Alicia Muir, Milton High School (Finalist)

As a global powerhouse, the United States is bestowed with a responsibility. This country stands upon its obligation and ability to be innovative, to provide opportunity and to maintain a respectable quality of living for every citizen. I would like to take this moment to address where we stand on these principles and how far we still have to go.

In our current state, economic problems are most apparent. While the economy rests in a steady stage of recovery, many of our neighbors struggle to obtain and secure an adequate standard of living. We can try to justify yearly improvement by pointing out that unemployment rates and gas prices are down. But despite such progress, the standard of living is always increasing. Paired with this fact is the abundant number of citizens who struggle to survive on a wage that is not livable. The obvious action to take is to raise the federal minimum wage, which has been set at \$7.25 since 2009. For a single person working 40 hours a week, the basic costs of food, housing, medical care, utilities, and other necessary expenses should be attainable with the lowest margin of pay. As of now, it is not. Starting in 2015, many states have already decided to raise their minimum wage. If we increase the pay benchmark on the federal level, every state will have to do the same.

When high school graduates are launched into adulthood, college is the promising route that comes with a discouraging debt sentence. Higher education is needed to be competitive in the job market. Rather than pouring mass amounts of money into defense spending and other well budgeted programs, legislators should create a larger budget for student loans and grants. I urge the United States to make college more accessible. In addition to the budget, the federal government can offer incentives for universities that will encourage them to administer greater financial aid packages and cut tuition costs. Specific criteria can even be established to provide free education to certain financial groups based on their low incomes.

Transitioning to a problem that is often neglected, I believe that as a country we must address the gender wage gap. To this day, a vast majority of women make on average only 75% of what men make. First, the United States has to establish a paid pregnancy leave at the standard of other industrialized nations. This will allow women to balance earning a sustainable income and raising a family. We can also regulate companies that retaliate against workers who discuss their wages, as well as increase the limitations on gender based pay discrimination. It's time to finally stop employers from paying less for equal work. Let us break down the glass ceiling.

To affirm that these programs will take place, and that these solutions will triumph, it is vital that the Congress disregards the party polarization that has crippled the government for so long. With collaboration and determination, the United States can prosper and prevail.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Curtis Richardson, Milton High School (Finalist)

My country, our country, is something I love and wish that everyone within its borders receives the highest amount of happiness possible and lives a life well fed and secure.

With that said an issue not talked about as much as it should. Homelessness. People spend their nights in cold dark alleyways covered only by the warmth of the Sunday paper. Shelters are full, stomachs empty. There are children who are homeless. There should never be a child without a warm place to sleep. By enacting programs which employ the homeless, and renovating buildings that serve no purpose, transforming them into shelters and low income housing we can find a solution to this problem and make sure that every American does not have to worry where they are going to sleep.

The poverty level in the United States is at 14.5 percent 42,000,000 Americans. A percentage that is entirely too high. A percentage of those Americans may work well over 40 hours a week, put in overtime and are yet still unable to rise above the poverty level. This is because the national minimum wage is at \$7.25. The minimum wage is not a livable wage. By raising the national minimum wage to over \$10 we can make sure that those hard working Americans are not living below the poverty line.

There is always a need for jobs in America. Many jobs are being outsourced for big business to make more money. By federally regulating how much a company can outsource jobs from America we can make companies open more factories in America and by doing so will open the way for more jobs spread throughout these United States.

While there are many domestic issues that are very important there are international ones as well. With the terrorist group Isis still at large we must ensure the security of citizens in the United States and places overseas. That is why we will have troops ready to be deployed. As long as there is a terrorist presence we will protect the people of the United States and its allies.

Bees are needed in order to pollinate flowers and grow many of the foods we eat. The bees are dying off and without them many of the foods we eat will increase in price and will deplete. Opening bee farms in America and increasing the bee population we can save many crops and flowers that the bees greatly assist with, and the federal government would also be assisting those small bee farmers who may be running low on business and this will be supporting the hard working Americans and not big business.

This cannot be accomplished alone. It will take the country as a whole cooperating with one another to make everything here into a reality. Working past party lines and finding an answer that's the best solution will ensure that these problems are solved.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Friedemann Schmidt, Brattleboro Union High School (Finalist)

Under the presidency of Ronald Reagan the United States turned within four years from the biggest creditor nation in the world in 1981 to the world's largest debtor in 1985. Supported by numerous foreign assignments of the U.S. Armed forces, the public debt increased constantly, reaching a figure of \$18 trillion in recent years. This is a very serious issue for the United States not only because it deepens the dependence on creditor nations like China or Saudi Arabia which neglect values like freedom and equality, but also it directly affects everyone.

In 2013 the interest payments of the U.S. public debt made up 6% of the federal budget excluding an actual debt reduction. With a steadily growing budget deficit, primarily due to outrageous defense spending, that figure will even form a larger part of the annual budget plan. Presumably that will lead to cuts in secondary areas like education, transportation and social as well as scientific endeavors. This symbolizes a threat to the belief of the founding fathers in equality and perhaps makes a myth of the United States offering fair chances for everyone, regardless of status.

By decreasing the governmental funding of social programs, like the free/reduced meal program offering meals to 20% of food insecure students in Vermont, the living status of numerous hard-working middle and lower class would drop. A declining federal funding of universities and colleges throughout the country would further increase the college tuition for individuals, creating an unaffordable higher education for hundreds of thousands of young, talented Americans - a problem America already faces.

The social injustice created by enlarging the gap between rich and poor, would weaken the unity of the United States as much as decreasing the funding of America's world-leading role in science and innovation, the key to economic success and human progress itself. Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich states that due to the fact that "Inequality has become worse, the danger to the economy and democracy had become worse."

The public debt will be one of the major challenges for United States politics in the near future. Facing it will have to lead to changes of American policies and its lead in world policy. Priorities have to be set and compromises have to be made. Martin Luther King Jr once said: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." It is the responsibility of every U.S. citizen to prevent that in order to maintain the prosperity and values for which America stands.

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' Fifth Annual State of the Union Essay Contest

Sophia Seman, Essex High School (Finalist)

As our nation ages and evolves, the problems it faces become more complex. Some of the greatest challenges we face today are those of police brutality, a flawed naturalization process, and the daunting cost of higher education.

In the past few months, cities in the US have erupted in protests over police brutality. Starting in Ferguson, marching feet have spread to New York and California. One solution to the spreading mistrust in law enforcement is the use of body cameras that would provide an account of each interaction. While many speculate that this would be an invasion of privacy, the departments that have tested these devices decided the benefits outweigh the risks. Rialto, CA has seen a “60 percent reduction in officer use of force incidents following camera deployment” and an “88 percent reduction in number of citizen complaints”. The federal government should issue categorical grants to any department that opts to implement the use of this technology. The cost to supply all the law enforcers with cameras may seem too high, but eventually, the money saved in lawsuits would counter the initial pay out.

This year, college students returned to school with considerably lighter pockets, as state tuition climbed another 2.9 percent. While many politicians realize the need for a highly educated work force for the future economy, few are willing to throw their weight behind the necessary reforms to make it more affordable. If young adults are expected to pay their way through college, they must have viable options in student loans. Unfortunately, “private college loans are much cheaper than federal student loans now”. It is the responsibility of our government to help budding adults pay for higher education and mold themselves into conscientious citizens by lowering federal interest rates on loans.

The US has always been a nation of immigrants. However it is the unfortunate American tradition that the newest wave of immigrants is detested by those who have formed roots. Today it is the Latinos who face a wave of prejudice. As much as it pains some lawmakers to admit, we need the fresh faces and new ideas as much as these prospective citizens need refuge from the turmoil of their home country. It is time for a renovation of the naturalization process. Because the US does not have an official language and many new citizens site English as “one of the biggest obstacles”, the English portion of the test should be eliminated. Questions pertaining to civil rights should be emphasized on the Civics Test, rather than superfluous ones about history, as citizens should be more aware of their rights and responsibilities than the War of 1812.

The most pressing issues facing the Union today are those of police brutality, rising college and university costs and the labyrinthine naturalization process. They demand quick, effective solutions, such as police-worn cameras, lowered interest rates on student loans, and a revised naturalization test.