

2017 State of the Union Essay Contest
Packet of Winning Essays



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Quinn Nelson Mayo (St. Johnsbury Academy Junior)

Second Place

Musa Mayange (Winooski High School Senior)

Third Place

AJ DeFelice (Hartford High School Freshman)

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Finn Abbey (Mount Mansfield Union High School Freshman)

Emily Ballou (South Royalton High School Senior)

Billy Bender (Hanover High School Sophomore)

Simon Bupp-Chickering (Bellows Falls Union High School Senior)

Emma Carlson (St Johnsbury Academy Junior)

Mason Charlebois (Vergennes Union High School Junior)

Rainbow Chen (Winooski High School Senior)

Jessica Daigle (Oxbow High School Junior)

Keelan Durham (Oxbow High School Freshman)

Morgen Edwards (Milton High School Senior)

Rebecca Green (St. Johnsbury Academy Sophomore)

Abigail Halnon (Milton High School Senior)

Zoe Houlihan (North Country Union High School Freshman)

Graham Janson (Montpelier High School Junior)

Ira Richardson (Bellows Falls Union High School Senior)

Julia Stergas (Bellows Free Academy Fairfax Senior)

Karley Zier (Missisquoi Valley Union High School Junior)

Winner

Quinn Nelson Mayo (St. Johnsbury Academy Junior)

The United States was founded on several core values; the most important, as most of us agree, is freedom. This shared belief has been the foundation of our country for over 200 years. And for centuries, media has been a major outlet for people to exercise this freedom because it allows them to share their opinions with the masses. The idea of free speech took on a different meaning with the development of the internet in the late 80s. Since then, this liberty has grown exponentially. Now people have the ability to share their thoughts with a much larger audience. It is possible to do this anonymously and without fear of consequence. The internet is an incredible asset which has helped with globalization and the spread of information. However, this form of media does have its drawbacks. The leading issue is that it enables the spread of false information. So, while the internet embodies our nation's core value of freedom, it can also be detrimental to another vital aspect of our society: educated and well informed citizens.

Regardless of one's political views, we can all agree that 2016 has been a tumultuous year for politics, here in the United States and across the globe. The 2016 presidential campaign was a dramatic affair, and just the opening act to one of the most high-stakes elections in our country's history. The actions and rhetoric of the president-elect have inspired a great political shift, as well as a burgeoning sense of xenophobia and hatred throughout the country. During times such as these, it is important to focus on what we can do to create a better future. Much of the hate directed towards certain groups of people is due to ignorance and can be traced back to stereotypes perpetrated by unreliable media sources. Forcing media sites to drastically increase their censorship would rightfully anger their users, on the grounds that it restricts their constitutional right to free speech. Therefore, the most plausible and effective solution to the problem of misinformation is to educate people.

As of this year, 78% of the United States population has a social media profile (Statista). Facebook and Twitter have billions of users across the world. It is imperative that we use such sites with care. The recent controversies over fake news have made the influence of the media on politics increasingly apparent. The rumor now known as "Pizzagate" is a prime example of a fake news story with tremendous influence. Millions of people believed that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child-prostitution ring run out of a pizza parlor. This is because, for a vast number of people, social media and biased news sources are their only ways of acquiring information. In fact, it is estimated that 62% of American adults use social media at least occasionally as a news source (Pew Research Center). However, many blindly make the assumption that it is accurate. When hundreds of thousands of people are susceptible to hate-driven fake news, it can have a huge impact on our democracy.

This is why I propose the incorporation of media literacy as a core subject in all public schools. Public schools educate the majority of our nation's children. Which is why, by teaching America's youth how to approach sources impartially and critically, we can fix this problem of misinformation. Integrating media literacy as a required course at elementary and high-school levels is an investment in our future generations.

Second Place

Musa Mayange (Winooski High School Senior)

A Perspective on Racism

Twelve years and still no change. After fleeing from a civil war in Somalia in 1992, my parents took refuge at a refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya. After 12 years of struggle, in 2004 we flew from the National Airport of Kenya to J.F.K International Airport in New York thinking our lives were saved. Finally here, the land of the free and the home of the brave. One of the only places on earth where you can taste opportunity and smell a second chance. At the age of 17, I can see it now. America's resistance to change.

Racism exists in America. Surveys reveal that whites apply stereotypical thinking about blacks, considering them lazy and unintelligent. What are we going to do about these attitudes towards persons of color?

The American National Election Studies asked voters to rank blacks and whites from hardworking to lazy, from intelligent to unintelligent. In 2012, 62 percent of whites gave blacks a lower score in at least one area. In 2008, 45 percent of whites expressed negative feelings about black stereotypes. (Milbank, Washington Post)

For a while, we thought that the issue of racism was over and that our nation was going to move forward and "leave the past in the past." It almost had me fooled because we live in Vermont and we sometimes can be isolated from world issues. But racism is still here. When everyone thought that it was no longer "relevant," it's still alive.

As a young African-American immigrant, how can I wrap my head around this? As Vermonters how can we annihilate racism and get our community to be accepting of all races, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds?

Ta-Nehisi Coates addresses the disadvantages of living with black skin in *Between the World And Me*. Coates says "... today, when 8% of the world's prisoners are black men, our race has been refinanced to the Dream of being white. Black life is cheap, but in America, black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value." Black people are born with a disadvantage. We are more likely to go jail than white people. The Center for American Progress says, "In the United States, black people account for 60 percent of those imprisoned. The prison population grew by 700 percent from 1970 to 2005, a rate that is outpacing crime and population rates. Black people make up 17% of the United States population yet more of us are in jail. A black man is twice as likely to go to jail than a white man, even if they did the same crime.

Racism was born when humans identified skin color as a positive or negative factor. If each of us could accept that we are all humans, we come from different places, and have different interests, we could accept racial differences, but not let them divide us. We will never move forward if we don't work together side by side and knock down obstacles.

Third Place

AJ DeFelice (Hartford High School Freshman)

The United States is one of the greatest countries on Earth, prized for its natural beauty, economic opportunities, and democratic principles. However, many challenges face our nation. Among the most pressing issues are climate change, immigration, and income inequality.

Perhaps the most daunting problem we face is climate change, and the crucial role our country plays in it. Although President Obama recently signed the Paris Agreement to limit greenhouse gas emissions, much must still be done to combat this issue. We can begin by putting unemployed or low-income Americans to work—manufacturing, transporting, and installing renewable energy products—such as solar panels, wind turbines, and more. This would produce a similar effect as the New Deal put into place by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to combat the negative effects of the Great Depression. Additionally, a carbon tax should be established nationally, to lower emissions, and encourage the usage of renewable energy. A carbon tax would also allow for tax reductions in other areas, and combined with employing Americans to transition to widespread renewable energy, would create economic growth, while simultaneously reducing our carbon footprint.

Another controversial issue which troubles our nation is immigration. The United States is a country built on the backs of immigrants, and to deny a path to citizenship to millions who long only for a higher quality of life is unpatriotic. We must stop dehumanizing these people and see them only for who they are—people. Immigrants strengthen our economy, whether it be as producers, consumers, or developers. To deny them access to citizenship in our nation would be depriving ourselves of economic growth and cultural diversity. Economic and cultural change that would only strengthen American society.

Income inequality is another issue which plagues our nation today. According to countless years of research, income inequality has a direct correlation on social and health issues. A study conducted by the University of Wisconsin found that people who reside in more financially unequal communities are more likely to die before the age of 75. As national income inequality decreases, so do social and health problems. This decline can be seen in Scandinavian countries, where having a more equal gross domestic product per capita results in a higher quality of life. To make this possible for the United States, corporations must be regulated and held accountable by lawmakers to be sure that the American people are receiving the representation they deserve. As citizens, we must be responsible in electing officials who will place the needs of the greater population above the interests of wealthy corporate executives.

Our nation is at a turning point in its history, and the choices we make today will have lasting effects on future generations.

The United States of America will remain a strong, respected, and prosperous nation if we are able to look past our disagreements and focus on making progress through compromise. We must act wisely, and keep our eyes on what is most important—the liberty we treasure as our nation's crowning promise.

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Finn Abbey (Mount Mansfield Union High School Freshman)

Our country has faced many issues in the past, but today we face one of our greatest challenges. Division. We have forgotten to care for each other; forgotten that we are only strong with each other. We are growing too uncompassionate, too distrustful of each other. We can and must remember that we are not enriched by the success of one person, but rather the success of many. We prosper not with the defeat of others, but with their success. And keeping with the philosophy that we must succeed together, we must work together on smaller challenges.

Our country needs a system that not only doesn't punish the poor for their very existence, but offers every person the chance to better themselves. The hope that your children will have a better life than you has long been a staple of the American dream. To accomplish this, we need to create a liveable wage of \$15, and create a progressive tax system that leaves the poor with more and takes fairly from those who can afford it. We cannot be satisfied in the splendor of ourselves and people like us when our fellow Americans are living in the streets.

We must also institute universal health care. This will involve higher taxes, of course, but, combined with strict laws about pharmaceutical pricing and a fair tax system, will ensure that our country is healthy and our middle class stays strong. No one should ever have to choose between food and medicine. We need change.

We also must guarantee everyone the right to vote, and that their votes count. Time and time again voter ID laws have suppressed the African-American vote. We cannot say we are equal when we pass laws with the purpose of lowering voter turnout.

We also have to remove another recent mistake in election law: Citizens United. We cannot accept catering to special interests as a side effect of democracy; we must recognize it as a barrier to a fairer system. We must put the redrawing of congressional districts in the hands of independent commissions to prevent gerrymandering. Anything less is a conflict of interest and a mockery of democracy. We need to replace first past the post with ranked choice voting, allowing for a greater variety of candidates. This will serve as another booth in the marketplace of ideas.

To many these goals are mountains too tall to climb. But in America, we don't know how to give up. It's what makes us great. The idea that if we want change, we'll fight until we reach it. It's what got African-Americans equality under the law. It's what got women the right to vote. It's what has brought equal love to our entire nation. And it's what led to independence for the plucky colonists who took on the world because they thought it could be better. Throughout our history, all we've needed is an idea, an ideal, and each other. After all, out of many, we are one.

Emily Ballou (South Royalton High School Senior)

It is both a privilege and an honor to live in a nation where I have the right to speak my mind without the fear of failure or retribution, where liberty of expression is celebrated, and diverging views, though challenged, are entitled to develop according to their merit.

The greatest problem we have is that the people of our country lack compassion. We lack empathy. We need to integrate our passions instead of separating them. Love should trump hate, but it seems as of late that that is reversed. We must renew our nation, and to do so, we must stop the ignorance of the public. We must end the bigoted, chauvinistic, and discriminatory ideologies and mindsets of our people.

What we have in common is more important than the differences used to divide us. Groups of like-minded people acting in a similar fashion are not a new phenomenon, but the engagement of these groups has become dedicated to excluding the expression of other views.

What makes a country great is not how rich the monetary funds of the upper class is, but how well its most vulnerable citizens are treated. This is why we must start early and teach the next generation to kindness and to love.

When someone of power misuses his or her status to bully those more vulnerable, their actions are desensitized. This disrespect incites more discord which invites both fear and hatred into the minds of all ages. The very young feel no hatred. Currently, not all adolescents are being taught the importance of tolerance and empathy in their homes, schools, or in public. These lessons must begin in their earliest years of schooling before they acquire biases from around them and their beliefs are negatively impacted.

The vernacular must include words of kindness, not derogatory terms or racially-charged slurs. No matter what an individual's values are, they should not value the discrimination and hatred associated with these words. Silence is compliance. The cycle of history will continue to repeat itself unless people begin to empathize with all. If one wishes to "Make America Great Again," hate should not be the weapon of choice. We must be more inclusive and accepting of the diversity in which this nation has prided and built itself on, for change begins with ourselves.

Love does trump hate. Although we adhere to the flaws in society, we must not. We must instill hope into those of the coming generations. There is hope that our world will see peace. There is hope that our world will be preserved. There is hope for change. We are "a nation of the people, by the people, for the people that shall not perish from the Earth," where people, no matter their race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender, should take comfort in. We are the great United States of America, and the day we forget that, we will cease to exist, because despite current circumstances, the world is not entirely lost if everyone resists, together.

Billy Bender (Hanover High School Sophomore)

Mr Speaker, Mr Vice President, Members of the 115th Congress and Distinguished Guests,

As Americans we face many difficulties, but two are of particular concern: one is a challenge to our world, the other to our republic. We can and must do more to stop global warming, and we can and must get big money out of politics.

Climate Change is real. The scientific debate is over. We have already begun to see its effects in the United States. Large sections of the country have experienced severe droughts and wildfires, hurricanes have been more violent, and our summers are becoming dangerously hot in the south. Internationally, long-term droughts are causing malnutrition, threatening coastal cities, and creating climate refugees. This is real, it is urgent, it is a direct result of the actions of humans, and its impact will be felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable peoples on our planet. We caused it, and we can stop it. We have a responsibility toward our children, our grandchildren, and all of the future inhabitants of our planet.

Our government needs to invest heavily in large scale clean energy infrastructure projects. We need to renew and add to the existing subsidies on renewable energy to make solar or wind a viable financial option for homeowners and businesses. We need to invest heavily in clean energy research and stop subsidizing fossil fuels. When renewables like solar, wind and hydro power are cheaper than oil, then the massive oil companies will have no choice but to become energy companies instead of oil companies and build dams, wind farms and solar fields. We will no longer have to tolerate the risks of nuclear energy.

However, to achieve the goal of powering our nation with renewable energy, we need to take the influence of huge, anonymous donors out of American politics. Citizens United has allowed huge corporations to funnel millions of dollars into electing politicians who regard them favorably. The fossil fuel industry is hugely profitable, and the millionaires and billionaires who control them want to delay and diminish the impact of renewables on their bottom line. Their huge sums of money give them a massively disproportionate voice in elections, allowing them to create Super PACs which will ensure the continued existence of dangerous, damaging practices like fracking.

Climate change is a critical problem facing our nation and our world, but it will be difficult to take the bold steps necessary to mitigate its effects without first eliminating the advantage that billionaires have in our elections. It is time to take large scale legislative and judicial steps to eliminate the out sized voice of the extremely wealthy and save our planet for all who come after us.

Simon Bupp-Chickering (Bellows Falls Union High School Senior)

The Death Penalty: Pointless by Nature, Disgusting in Practice

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” -Martin Luther King Jr.

A nation that neglects to confront and eliminate injustice is no true defender of its people's rights. Due to the death penalty's inherent inability to be more than state sponsored revenge, its exorbitant cost, and the lack of statistical evidence showing it does anything to stop murder, the death penalty is an antiquated and medieval punishment that has no place in a modern democracy.

One of the most common arguments brought up by proponents of the death penalty is the idea that enforcing the death penalty acts as a deterrent for other criminals. However, this argument fails to account for the fact that the vast majority of murderers aren't executed, less than one percent. In addition, 88 percent of criminologists, experts who study crime for a living, refute the idea that the death penalty works as a deterrent. Furthermore, as the South accounts for 80 percent of all executions in the United States, if the death penalty did act as deterrence, then those states would have the lowest rates of murder. However, the South holds the country's highest murder rate, and the North, which accounts for less than 1 percent of the country's executions, has the lowest murder rate.

The death penalty as it is practiced today is simply a tool for revenge, misguidedly used in an attempt to help grieving families. The finality of the punishment destroys any hope of reflection, apology, or forgiveness, thus eliminating any chance of true healing. Additionally, revenge is an emotional response to tragedy, and the judicial system in America should be about providing just and emotionally unbiased decisions. Instead of perpetuating a cycle of violence, the United States government should promote restorative justice, which promotes rehabilitation and the improvement and bettering society rather than resort to base human emotions in response to tragedy.

In order to prevent this outdated and pointless practice of state-funded murder from damaging our justice system any further, the death penalty must be abolished nationwide, and those on death row should have their sentences commuted to life in prison without parole. In a modern, civilized society, there is no place for such a horrific punishment. Most other enlightened nations around the world have removed the death penalty from their judicial systems. Instead of remaining among the questionable company of nations such as North Korea, America must prove that it understands the egregious error in killing as punishment for killing.

Ultimately, the fact that the United States still uses the death penalty reveals a fundamental lack of ethical maturity in our nation, and is a mark of shame to Americans who want to believe that the country they live in has evolved from the barbaric practices of antiquity along with the rest of the civilized world.

Emma Carlson (St Johnsbury Academy Junior)

Poverty in the Wealthiest Nation

America is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Home to world-leading companies in technology, consumer goods, pharmaceutical, and financial industries, the U.S. has a gross domestic product of 18.56 trillion dollars. And yet, poverty impacts people in both rural and urban areas who are working for minimum wage, elderly people who must live on a fixed income, and those who have lost their jobs. For a country as rich and resourceful as ours, we have the ability to solve the complex situation of poverty if we work together as a nation to find a solution.

Despite all of our wealth, we still have nearly 15% of people living below the poverty line. In 2016, the poverty threshold for a family of four is \$24,036 per year. These individuals are forced to make difficult choices between paying for food, medicine, heat, gas, or rent. Today we are seeing increase in the loss of manufacturing jobs, causing many additional people to become unemployed and drop below the poverty line. We are losing these jobs due to technological advances that have replaced a lot of workers, while other jobs have been moved to lower-cost countries because the labor to perform those jobs is much cheaper. Another cause of long term poverty is the lack of access to high-quality early education. In addition, children of families in poverty do not consistently receive a college education, and therefore, lack the skills and opportunities to acquire a well-paying job in today's economy.

Poverty in America needs to be solved for every individual to receive opportunities to live a quality life. There are several political debates as to how we can most effectively reduce poverty, and as a result, very little gets accomplished toward achieving this goal and poverty continues to be on the rise. The first step toward helping to lower poverty rates is to create more jobs in America. The majority of companies in the U.S. are small businesses. If the government can help small businesses thrive, it can create more jobs for those in poverty. By pulling families out of poverty, it gives their children better opportunities to receive a quality education, making it easier for them to get jobs to support their future families. This can help to break the vicious cycle of children being born into poverty without any control over it. In addition, we need to make a basic college education available and affordable to any citizen who is willing to obtain one. Without addressing the fundamental needs of education and jobs, the cycle of poverty in America will not be resolved.

Our politicians need to recognize that poverty is a serious problem, and must work together on common goals towards defeating it. There are many solutions and sometimes there will need to be compromises as to what the best solution may be. If we do not solve this poverty problem, our nation will continue to decline and overall living conditions will become worse for a lot more people.

Mason Charlebois (Vergennes Union High School Junior)

We do not live in a democracy anymore. We live in an oligarchy obscured by the word democracy. For too long our country, a nation established upon ideals of impeccable freedoms and liberties, has discarded the will and determination of the American people. The rich get richer while the poor grow poorer and there seems to exist no hope, no persistence, and no optimism in the people, but instead there resides feelings of despair and anguish. Why would I blame them? Today in our nation's capital, almost every bill that is made, every law that is passed, every donation given proclaims in a final respect, a refusal to aid the poor and middle class of the United States. The loyalties, affairs, and interests of our government no longer lie with the American populace, but with immense multinational corporations and the wealthy who value profit over people.

If you don't believe me, allow me to introduce some daunting numbers. According to Inequality.org, "Income disparities have become so pronounced that America's top 10 percent now average nearly nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent." But wait, there's more. They also mention "Americans in the top 1 percent tower stunningly higher. They average over 38 times more income than the bottom 90 percent." Citizens of the United States, this is the most critical issue of the century and possibly the history of America. This is not something that can be disregarded as irrelevant because this not only hurts you, it hurts every aspect that makes this country for the people.

So, what can we, the American people, do to vanquish this unjust society that we find ourselves living in? First, we start by establishing a tax on institutions that make more than \$1,000,000 a year. For years, these monarchs of trade and commerce have sneaked through loopholes in legislation and haven't been paying their taxes. This is unacceptable in the country this great nation of America. Secondly, we dissolve major institutions or establishments that are taking advantage of Americans every single day. Wells Fargo, Capital One and Citigroup are just some of the financial institutions paying their fair share. Finally, it is vital for Americans to be educated on these issues in the first place. That is why I support a universal childcare schooling program where no one will be denied access to education based on their annual income. When we have an informed public, we will be one step closer to "the people's" victory: your victory.

To close, I would like to introduce a quote from the late Thomas Jefferson who said "Experience demands that man is the only animal which devours his own kind, for I can apply no milder term to the general prey of the rich on the poor." Change never takes place from the top down. It takes place when people, just like you and me, rise up in peaceful protest and say we want a different America. We want change.

Rainbow Chen (Winooski High School Senior)

Our America

The “American Dream” states that every American has the opportunity to become successful if they work hard. In reality, the American Dream is a blatant lie that falsely guides citizens on an idealistic path. If our country truly wants to make the American Dream a reality, we must provide citizens with the opportunity to best change their lives: a new education system. Education will help us give the poor what they need, help vulnerable children from birth to five, and create a meaningful life for our citizens.

Right now, a poor citizen has a slim chance of rising to middle or upper-middle class. A study from the Pew Charitable Trust says that 70% of lower income households stay in the lower income bracket; only 30% rise to middle class or high-income status. In 2015, nearly 48% of Americans live in low-income and impoverished situations, including my own family. Vermont may only have a 12% poverty rate, but disadvantages in resources, opportunities, and financial support have prevented me from reaching the same level of achievement and opportunity as my middle class peers. We need to readjust food stamp and welfare programs to support low-income families. Educational opportunities for the poor must become equitable so that low-income students can perform as well as their middle-class peers. If education becomes equitable, we may see more people working and fewer children suffering.

A study from Concordia University showed that "...high-quality education early in a child's life leads to continued success later in school, at work... spending resources toward education earlier in life is much more fiscally responsible than paying later to help a struggling child catch up." Our country tends to take early childhood for granted, ignoring the benefits of early education. If we increased paid maternity/paternity leave, children could engage with their families for a longer part of their childhood, helping them become the strong leaders of the future throughout early education and their futures.

A flaw in the education system consistently prevents all students from achieving their potential. Schools need to push away from what a Purdue University study calls the “superchicken” model, which studies the “best chickens of the coop”. This study showed that after separating the superchickens from the normal chickens, the superchickens pecked each other to death while the regular chickens proved successful regardless of productivity rates. In our educational system, we cannot place the “smartest kids” in one system, as it will damage all children's education.

Overall, education must be changed. Everyone needs access to learning opportunities, an equitable education for the poor and the average, and revitalize public school funding to ensure that all schools receive a fair share of distributed money. Fixing education will allow America to fix poverty, improve early childhood development, and allow more citizens to reach the American Dream. As the best country in the world, we need to create a possible dream, which means fixing the broken rungs in society's “ladder of success”.

Jessica Daigle (Oxbow High School Junior)

My fellow Americans, I have one question for you. How do we, the United States of America, have the best economy in the world, yet can't afford to give our people basic necessities? We're one of the richest countries in the world, but we can't feed our population, or give them healthcare? Why are so many people living without a roof over their head? We can't run from these problems; we must face them and find a solution.

First and foremost, we must address our food problem. In 2015 alone, 42.2 million Americans lived in food insecure households; 13.1 million were children. How are we supposed to build a strong future if we can't feed our children? In fact, one in five children are at risk of hunger. In Latino and African American societies, it's one in three. This is an urgent problem we must fix. We must stop throwing away edible food and find a way to give it to those without. Every year in the US, 40% of food is thrown away. This equates to \$165 billion's worth. All of this uneaten food could feed 25 million Americans. In order to feed those in need, we must stop wasting resources. We cannot keep throwing away perfectly edible food.

Healthcare is another demanding issue. In 2014, 29 million Americans didn't have health insurance; that's ten percent of our population. And, in that 29 million, 4.5 million were children. Those statistics are unacceptable. We must find a solution. In 2010, President Obama tried with the Affordable Care Act- commonly known as Obamacare. This worked well, as 20 million people were able to get insurance. Yet, Presidential Elect Donald Trump wants to repeal it. If he does, he must instate a new and more affordable healthcare system. We cannot go without it. What would those 29 million people do? They're relying on Obamacare, and can't afford to be without it.

Homelessness is defined as a social crisis in the United States today, as it should be, considering this fact: on any given night, about half a million Americans experience homelessness. Out of those people, 15% have been homeless for over a year, 50% are over the age of fifty, and 8% are veterans. Not to mention the 1.14 million veterans who are at risk of homelessness. Again, we're one of the richest countries in the world, yet we can't afford to house our population? We can't house those who fought for our country, for our freedom? We must do something. We must create more safe havens or emergency shelters. We can't allow so many Americans to be living in such horrible conditions.

Clearly, these tasks will be difficult to take on. If we want to boast about our prestigious economy and wealth, we must first fix our problems with poverty in the lower class. We cannot be considered an esteemed country until every last one of us has food, healthcare, and a roof over our heads.

Keelan Durham (Oxbow High School Freshman)

Climate change is the most important issue facing our nation and the biggest challenge our world has ever faced. It threatens us at the most immediate level - the very land, water and air that we have called home for thousands of years. Addressing climate change will require tremendous policy shifts and changing massive amounts of infrastructure that we have spent many years and billions of dollars making. And it will require people and governments to collaborate at a worldwide level.

The United States is the richest most powerful country in the world. We have achieved this position in world politics by being a leading force in creating prosperity and democracy around the world. However, by achieving this, we have wreaked havoc on the environment at the expense of the greater world. Now, we have a moral obligation to lead the world in implementing strong policies toward a renewable future. If we fail to address climate change, both our nation and nations around the globe will suffer tremendous consequences. According to the environmental protection agency's (EPA) "Climate Impacts on Coastal Areas", Rising seas alone will cause the United States to lose a projected 28,800 square miles of land. This would submerge large parts of fourteen US cities, displace 25 million people, and destroy billions of dollars worth of real estate. Rising seas would claim beautiful areas all along the coast such as the beaches of Culebra the multimillion dollar condos of Malibu or of the beautiful coast of California. Outside the United States, small island countries that have done very little to cause global warming could be wiped off the face of the planet.

As the richest most powerful country with the oldest, and arguably the strongest, democracy ever we need to take bold action and implement strong policies to stop global warming. There are many things the United States can do to address climate change. We could put a price on carbon pollution; this would create a disincentive to use oil and possibly hurt oil companies profits. We could create strong incentives and grants for renewable energy; this would make it easier and cheaper for individuals and businesses to install renewable energy like solar or wind. A huge step forward would be to ban coal mining and oil extractions from public lands - just this would keep millions of tons of CO₂ out of the atmosphere and greatly help the environment. Merely stopping all new gas and oil infrastructure in its tracks would be a huge step in the fight against climate change. There is more we can do but this would be a start.

Currently the United States has been doing very little to combat global warming. The Paris Agreements were a step in the right direction but oil companies still have many members of congress working for them and with Donald Trump as president progress will likely be lost and not made. This is why we must fight for this issue, and all issues that we know are important. If we do this, we show the oil companies and corrupt politicians that this government is for "we the people of the United States" and not "we the super huge and super rich corporations of the United States". Together we can make huge progress towards a renewable energy future and towards protecting our environment for future generations.

Morgen Edwards (Milton High School Senior)

My fellow Americans, our country spends more on training men and women to go to war than what it does on training our family members and our neighbors to come home. We spend more money on the military as whole, than what we do our veterans. Our veterans deserve more benefits through an increased budget of ten percent, we must reform the VA, and help to put an end to the 22 veterans who commit suicide a day. To help put an end to veteran suicide rates, there should be funding to create a separate organization to solely focus on the mental health of our veterans, re-adjusting them to civilian life, and acting as a twenty-four hour hotline to help prevent veteran suicide. This should be comprised of experts, and people who can adequately represent them when it comes to congress and budgeting.

In order to save our veterans, we first must provide the VA with a better budget, in order for the VA to provide veterans with access to benefits. The projected budget for the president to spend on the VA as of 2017 is 182.3 billion dollars, and according to the VA this is a “4.9% increase over the 2016 enacted level.” If we increase the budget by ten percent to start out, than the VA could have more money to provide our veterans with better benefits, thus helping to cut down on wait times by employing more qualified individuals, while helping to provide more options for care and help to the men and women who need it. According to Military times “The average wait time across the system as of May 15 was 6.89 days for primary care, 10.15 days for specialty care and 4.4 days for mental health appointments, according to the report.” Wait times should be no more than three to four days, and if at all possible we should try cutting that down even more, to ensure the safety of our veterans.

We must train our veterans on how to readjust to civilian life, help them to find and maintain jobs, help them find housing and teach them about PTSD and mental health awareness. We must train them to not be afraid to speak out about their mental health. Most importantly, we must not send them away when they seek help, telling them to “just forget about it.” If we have the means to train them to go to war, than we must take those same means but apply it to training them to come home. No longer should we send of veterans home to fend for themselves. If we have the resources to send them to boot camp to go to war than we have the resources to send them to boot camp to come home. We should try and expand the Wounded Warriors Project, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and American Veterans and their efforts to provide transition programs.

Rebecca Green (St. Johnsbury Academy Sophomore)

I believe that one of the most pressing issues that is facing our nation today is the conservative movement to remove federal funding from Planned Parenthood. I think that this is very important, because Planned Parenthood clinics are key providers not only of family planning services, but also preventative care, and other important health care services for low income women and families, and therefore, defunding this organization would negatively impact access to healthcare in these vulnerable socioeconomic groups.

The movement to defund Planned Parenthood is centered primarily on ideological and political reasons surrounding the pro-life movement and their argument that tax dollars should not be allowed to support organizations that provide abortions. Yet, Planned Parenthood data demonstrated that only 3% of their budget goes to fund abortion, with the rest of their funds going to contraceptive services (31%), testing and treatment of STD's (45%), other women's health care services (14%), and screening and prevention of cancer (7%). According to a report from the Guttmacher Institute, in 2014, Planned Parenthood prevented 2.2 million unintended pregnancies and averted many cases of sexual transmitted diseases, and cervical and breast cancer through screening PAP smears and mammograms and HPV tests and vaccinations, resulting in a net public savings of \$13.6 billion, or \$7.09 for every public dollar spent. Defunding Planned Parenthood clinics could therefore have a significant negative impact on both these health benefits and the health care savings that come from their services.

An example of the effects of this movement to defund Planned Parenthood can be seen in the case of Texas, where cutting federal funding to this organization led to closure of more than 80 clinics and deprived thousands of low-income women of highly effective contraceptive methods, resulting in a drastic increase in the rate of births covered by Medicaid.

In conclusion, Planned Parenthood has created a nationwide network of clinics that provide a wide breadth of services to low income women and families who often fall in the gap between Medicaid and insurance coverage. Efforts to defund this organization would deprive this vulnerable socio-economic group from important health care services, and cause profound negative impact, not just on preventative care and overall women's health, but on state and national health care spending.

Abigail Halnon (Milton High School Senior)

My fellow Americans, I am humbled and thrilled to be your president. I believe that the American people are generous, insightful, and accepting. Our nation gains its power, strength, and beauty from its diversity. We strive, as a nation, to be an international leader in perpetuating ideals of freedom and equality. It is my concern that there are many acts in this country that violate these fundamental beliefs.

It is important that the United States is a country recognized as a pioneer of social justice on a worldwide stage. It is our moral duty to uphold the highest standards of equality and acceptance. We have made great steps towards this in recent years. The landmark Supreme Court decision in 2015 of *Obergefell v. Hodges* upheld the fundamental right to marry, regardless of sex. We must further prove our nation's belief in freedom and opportunity by the legislation that we pass. There is progress yet to be made.

Currently, practicing conversion therapy on gay and bisexual Americans is widely permitted across the U.S. This is a process under which non-heterosexual people are subjected to various means to reverse their sexual orientation. Conversion therapy, based on a scientifically discredited premise, must see an immediate ban. It permits the means to punish and abuse innocent Americans. The vast majority of these victims are minors. This practice perpetuates a false and violent belief system that homosexuality is a mental disease and that a cure must be sought. It is an obscene violation of the basic human rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans. It should not be permitted by law.

Although it receives little public support, only 5 states have banned conversion therapy on minors. These acts of hate and misinformation must be outlawed nationwide. It is an injustice and a crime to subject torture on Americans, most often minors, who have committed no offense. An immediate country-wide ban must take place.

We must work to defy all accounts of prejudice based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The freedom and mobility of transgender and nonbinary Americans is severely limited. Their rights and protection are being eroded by current legislation. A recent law in North Carolina known as the "bathroom bill" allows regulation of bathroom access for transgender individuals. Legislation that regulates bathroom use by transgender Americans is an act of hate and tragic misinformation. Rates of violence or misconduct by transgender individuals in bathrooms are so unprecedented that there are virtually no statistics on it. There is no need for regulation. These laws must immediately be struck down. These are basic and necessary rights and they must not be infringed upon. Discriminatory acts based on sexuality and gender identity have implications outside of their specific goals. The use of U.S. law to marginalize any group perpetuates dangerous and violent beliefs. Our misunderstanding cannot become rejection. Our fear cannot manifest into anger.

Americans will not stand for the perpetuation of hate, fear, and misinformation. We will not reject our neighbors and our friends. Our country must make these necessary steps towards true equality.

Zoe Houlihan (North Country Union High School Freshman)

When you think of America, do you think of McDonald's, big cities, high-tech phones and computers, or do you think about violence, fear, and hatred amongst people? Although America seems like a great place full of opportunities and freedom, it is quite the opposite if you are not a white, straight, cisgendered male. There are many problems in America that need to be fixed.

Racism has been ongoing for hundreds of years. Blacks, Hispanics and many other non-white groups have faced discrimination and hatred because of the color of their skin. Blacks are thought as more violent and lazy than whites. African Americans now constitute 1 million of the 2.3 million imprisoned population. They are also incarcerated at six times the rate of whites. NAACP says that 5 times as many whites are using drugs as Blacks, but they are being sent to prison at 10 times the rate of whites. Moreover, Blacks are getting shot at higher rate than whites. Although more whites are getting shot, there are about 160 million more white people than there are black people. While Whites make up 49% of those fatally shot by police officers, Blacks make up 24%, despite only being 13% of the US population. More than 250 blacks were killed in 2016. Furthermore, 47% of hate crimes have to do with race. Racism is such a big problem in America it's hard to say what an effective solution would be. One solution to this could be to get media stars that are POC to talk about racism. This could cause their fan base (which can be quite large) to change their ideas about African Americans. Another solution is to educate people on racism. Teaching young children in school about how racism started could lessen the number of people in each generation that feel negatively about people of color. Lastly, the government should make the policies about racism in schools and workplaces stricter. Telling kids "That is not appropriate" when they make a racist comment isn't doing anything. People need to be punished for making these comments because if they aren't it makes it seem like it isn't a big deal.

Another problem in America is sexism and sexual assault. Sexism makes it harder for women to get jobs and be well-off in life. According to the Huffington Post, well-off white men are three times more likely than women to be offered a job interview. Moreover, women that work 41-44 hours per week earn 84.6% of what a man working that same time would earn. Women that work more than 60 hours a week earn only 78.3% of what a man would earn. Similarly, in the House of Representatives only 19.3% are women, and in the Senate only 20% are women. In addition, when a woman claims to have been sexually assaulted, men usually blame the women. They ask what they were wearing, how "revealing" it was, and if they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol. One in four women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. Also, 683,000 adult women are forcibly raped each year. This is equal to 56,916 per month, 1,871 per day and 78 per hour. One solution to women not getting payed as much as men could be to make a policy that both women and men are to be paid equally. Furthermore, a solution to sexual assault is to teach kids about consent and to give longer sentences to people that have committed sexual assault. Another solution to sexism is to have more women representation in media and politics. This could help eliminate the thought that women are only made to have children, clean and cook. It would also give young girls more role models to look up to.

Finally, the last issue that needs to be fixed is hate and discrimination against the LGBT+ community. According to an analysis of data collected by the FBI, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are the most likely targets of hate crimes. An example of a hate crime against the LGBT+ community is the Orlando nightclub shooting. 49 were killed and at least 53 were injured. This shooting is considered the worst mass shooting in the United States and the nation's worst terrorist attack since 9/11. Additionally, LGBT+ people experience discrimination in the workforce. They actually have a higher unemployment rate than African Americans (15% versus 12%). People of color that are also part of the LGBT+ community face the most discrimination. A solution to this problem could be to educate young children about the different sexualities and explain that it's okay to feel attracted to whomever. Another solution is to create policies that would help protect people in the LGBT+ community. Lastly, there should be stricter rules about when a teacher hears a homophobic comment. Many kids say "That's so gay" when something that they don't like happens and it could make other kids feel unsafe.

In conclusion, America has many issues with equal rights that need to be fixed. One of the main solutions to every problem is education. When people are educated, they can use their knowledge to base their opinions off instead of going with what the popular opinion is or what they are hearing around them.

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Graham Janson (Montpelier High School Junior)

Whenever you ask someone the question, “What is the most pressing issue facing our nation today?” you will most likely get a different answer every time. An environmentalist might say, “Carbon emissions and global warming.” A conservative activist might say, “The increasing national debt.” There are many answers to this question. But there is only one answer that addresses an issue that lies at the center of our nation’s existence. That answer is that the fundamental democratic principles on which the United States is based are being eroded by voter suppression and gerrymandering.

Efforts to suppress voting rights for many people have been around since the Constitution was adopted as the supreme law of the land, when only property-owning white men could vote. We have come a long way since then, with African Americans, Native Americans, and American women gaining the right to vote, but we still have a long way to go. Similar to during Reconstruction, when literacy tests were used to deny African Americans the right to vote, a now-overturned North Carolina voter ID law was in effect that, according to the federal appeals court that dealt with the case, deliberately “target[ed] African-Americans” in an attempt to suppress their voter turnout. Other states, such as Ohio, Kansas, and North Carolina, have had voter ID laws that have been overturned after being ruled discriminatory by a federal appeals court. The overturning of these laws is already a step in the right direction. A way to address voter-suppression efforts is to require a federal court review for every voter ID law to make sure that there is no discrimination or infringement of American rights. Another way is to restore the provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Additionally, the repeal of some of the key aspects of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, which allowed nine states to alter their election laws without the approval of the federal government, demonstrates how gerrymandered elections can serve to undermine basic democratic principles. Gerrymandering involves altering the areas of electoral districts to favor one party or another, and both Democratic and Republican politicians have engaged in gerrymandering in the past. There have been many cases in which a political candidate has won an election because of gerrymandering. This clearly undermines our nation's democratic principles because now a candidate can carry the minority of an electorate and win an election, and it needs to change now. Furthermore, because these same elected officials appoint and confirm federal judges, voter suppression and gerrymandering can also undermine the judiciary's vital role in protecting democratic voting rights.

In conclusion, the restoration of equal voting rights and the elimination of gerrymandering would allow the United States to remain a true democracy. Indeed, the other pressing issues that face our nation today, such as global warming, economic development, immigration, healthcare, and gender equity, cannot be fairly addressed while our nation continues to utilize this flawed system that does not reflect democratic values.

Ira Richardson (Bellows Falls Union High School Senior)

When George Washington delivered his farewell address, he stated that “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension... is itself a frightful despotism.” Our first and only president who was not a member of a political party attempted to warn us of the threats they can pose to democracy. Today, however, the Democratic and Republican parties have become so powerful that one can hardly imagine the American democratic system without them. In a sense, this is one of the sources of their overbearing power: many Americans see them as an intrinsic part of our democracy rather than two organizations that were created long after the union to organize like-minded voters. Political parties are not inherently bad, but a system which creates a forced dichotomy by only giving voters two realistic choices for any given position has unquestionable negative effects on our nation. Firstly, it forces citizens who care deeply about specific issues to routinely vote for candidates whom they may not agree with in any other capacity so as to not violate their personal moral code. This, in turn, allows parties to cynically align themselves with these single-issue voters to win their votes without truly sharing their values. Additionally, two diametrically opposed political parties give rise to an us-versus-them mentality among citizens, eroding the mutual trust that is intrinsic in the formation of a nation.

To reduce the near-hegemonic power that the parties currently hold, it is imperative to make it more clear to the American public that both parties are private organizations, operating within their own processes and promoting goals that are not necessarily those of their constituents. The intention is not to cause Americans to stop supporting the party they belong to, but rather not to follow any party blindly, and to understand their complex histories and role in American democracy. Another step towards a system in which people could more consistently vote for politicians they truly support would be the implementation of an instant run-off (aka alternate or ranked) voting system. In such a system, a voter does not select a single candidate to receive a position, but rather ranks the order in which they support each candidate. If no candidate has over fifty percent of the vote, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and every citizen who selected them has their votes moved to their next choice, and the votes are tallied again. This process is repeated until a candidate has a majority. This alternative would allow people to vote their conscience without fear of handing the election to a candidate on the opposite side of the political spectrum. It would not destroy the existing political parties (which would be destabilizing) but rather allow third-party and independent candidates to speak for portions of the population who cannot identify with either existing party. By reducing the power of the two major parties, the environment necessary to address the many problems facing America could be created.

Julia Stergas (Bellows Free Academy Fairfax Senior)

Nearly 260 years ago our country endured a war over the rights of our states and the rights of its peoples. From this war came the first legislation to protect African Americans living in the United States. One-hundred years later, our country faced another revolution, resulting in new legislation that enhanced the ability for African Americans to participate in political and social life. Since then, many Americans have believed that racial equality has been achieved.

But here we are, fifty years later, struggling through yet another conflict over the divide between black and white. Tensions are high between African Americans and white authority figures in the United States. Distrust and anxiety separates black Americans from their government and onlooking citizens. In 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. That same year, a barrage of negative media emerged from an originally peaceful protest in Baltimore, Maryland, depicting unlawful rioters who looted and set fire to business, injuring six police officers. Now, we continue to watch video clips on nightly news highlighting the struggle between black and white. Through this our attention has been distracted from the true cause of continued racial conflict: the lack of recent successful intervention.

White authority figures are perpetually distrusted by the black community, and groups such as Black Lives Matter still believe inherent biases against African Americans are abundant in society. We must rebuild this connection. To achieve comprehensive change we must redirect our nation's path. The first step toward action is awareness. This issue must be introduced into schools, universities, and community centers. If we can enlighten young adults they will share their knowledge and work to obtain equality nationwide.

Educators would lead discussions on current and historic racial tensions in a non-partisan, open environment. Focusing on historic and current events and their social and political ramifications, these open debates would promote civic engagement and thoughtful problem solving. Prompts regarding the government's involvement and the responsibilities it should assume, the action we as the nation's youth should assume, and opportunities to develop individual solutions would be considered during discussion. Our young population is critical to the future of our nation, so it is necessary that we provide them with opportunities to immerse themselves in their political and social world.

Today's generation and the ones to follow will be our leaders and our visionaries. Incorporating awareness into education programs would introduce these leaders to the nuances of the world they will come to inspire, and allow them to develop an understanding of their political efficacy. Raising consciousness of this racial strain would encourage young leaders to take charge of their futures, and ours, and incite change. It is critical to the well being of our nation that we cultivate a generation of educated young adults who possess the skills to maneuver themselves in their political and social world. Addressing our nation's imperfection and coaching our youth will only be the start to a nationwide revolution of change and acceptance.

Karley Zier (Missisquoi Valley Union High School Junior)

Raising the price of minimum wage would benefit everyone differently, but all in a commendable way. This would give people on government assistance more of an incentive to secure a job. It would keep the average family of four from drowning in debt just to buy groceries for the week. According to Sherrod Brown, Senator of Ohio, "Anyone who's tried to pay a heating bill, fill a prescription, or simply buy groceries knows all too well that the current minimum wage does not cut the mustard." Sherrod explains exactly how tough it is to try and survive off from the ongoing minimum wage price.

Minimum wage in Vermont should be raised for a multitude of reasons. One way the state could benefit from this would be the amount of people withdrawing from welfare and other government funded programs. The state could benefit from this act because unemployed rates would go down with more people applying for jobs. Families living off of minimum wage have barely enough money to meet their basic needs per week or per month. Someone making minimum wage at \$9.60 an hour for eight hours a day and five days a week will earn \$384. Therefore, one will make \$1,536 per month without any taxes being taken out. According to USA Today, the average cost of groceries per week for a family of four is \$150-\$200. The average cost of rent in Vermont is \$900 per month. Being left with \$436, which would be non-existent due to taxes, leaves no room to pay for other needs or necessities. People wouldn't have money to pay for phone bills, transportation expenses, or daycare because one would be working. Someone would not be able to pay for any of these necessities because of the fact they wouldn't be able to afford them living off of minimum wage.

People who are using government assistance programs could benefit from this because there would be a reason for them to want to work. If people make the same amount off of welfare as they are making while working a forty hour job each week, of course they are going to choose welfare, or other government assistance programs. There is no incentive for the people on welfare to want to get a job with the minimum wage being so low and having to pay for expenses they wouldn't need to pay for while being unemployed. The other people in the state could benefit from this by the amount of people withdrawing from the welfare program. The more people who withdraw from the system, the less tax money that one say to pay to fund these types of programs. Overall, those are the reasons why the minimum wage in Vermont should be raised

