

From Bowling Alone to Bonding Together:
Strengthening Community in the Face of Polarization

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Dr. Robert Putnam is our most distinguished political scientist and civic historian. He published "Bowling Alone" in 2000 where he showed how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures- and how we may reconnect.

It's a super honor to be speaking in this historic moment. Here's what I'd like to do today. I'd like to talk with you about some of the problems, the deep problems, that have been facing America for, actually, for quite a while. But I want to begin, if you will allow me, by talking about where we are today. I'm going to then expand my horizon beyond the last six months or the last week, because our topic is very timely.

Overview of US national election 2024
US 2024 election was **normal**, not exceptional

- 2024 was not a classic landslide
- FDR won by 24% in 1936
- LBJ won by 23% in 1964
- Reagan won by 18% in 1984
- Trump won by 1.5%, no mandate

I want to begin, if I can, with some misunderstandings about last November's election. Trump claimed an historic victory and mandate and that's just completely not true. The 2024 election was completely normal. It was not a classic landslide, a classic landslide and landslides that FDR one in 1936 which led to the New Deal, or the landslide election by you may remember by LBJ in 1964, or on the other side of the aisle the landslide Reagan won in 1984 which produced Reaganomics. LBJ, of course, but did as all these life victories produced major changes in American politics. His was the Great Society and civil rights bills and Medicare and Medicaid. So you get a big victory and comfort, and you get a big mandate. But 2024 was nothing like that. It was one of

the closest elections in American history, 1.5% So he has no mandate. He's like he would like us to believe he has a mandate, but he doesn't. The 2024, election was also a normal election in another sense, if you can have the next slide, the issue was about economics. This is almost, almost always our election. Our elections are about the economy.

Overview of US national election 2024

In deeper historical perspective, the 2024 election was a major signpost

- Trump did not *create* polarized, atomized, unequal America. He *exploited* it.
- Steve Bannon say *Bowling Alone* was basis of Trump's political strategy.
- Empirical research confirms low social capital led to vote for Trump

And when it's about the economy, yes, because the ignorant when the economy turns, as it almost always does, that is trending right now, the political pendulum reverses. So if we look at the 2024, election and its aftermath, everything but the aftermath was normal, if we have the next slide, however, in a deeper sense, and this is what we talked about in a deeper historical sense, the 2024 election was a major signpost historically. First of all, we have, this is what I'm talking about mostly this afternoon.

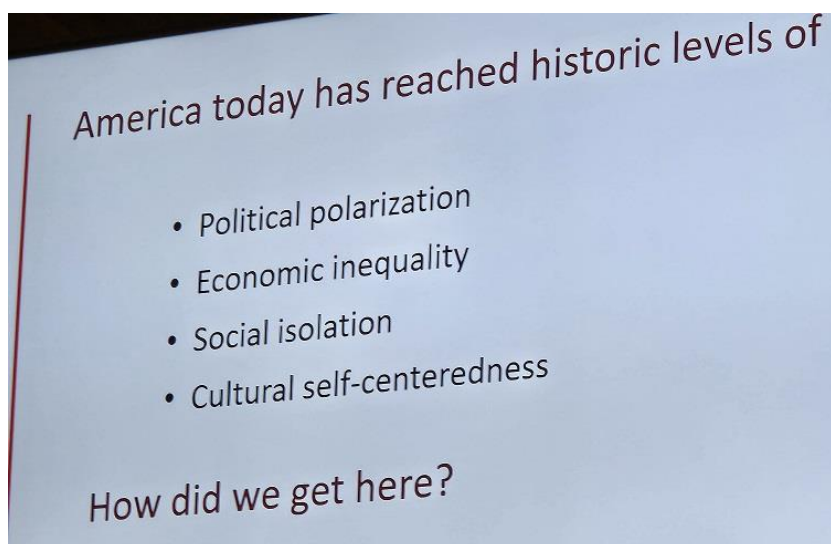
Overview of US national election 2024

In deeper historical perspective, the 2024 election was a major signpost.

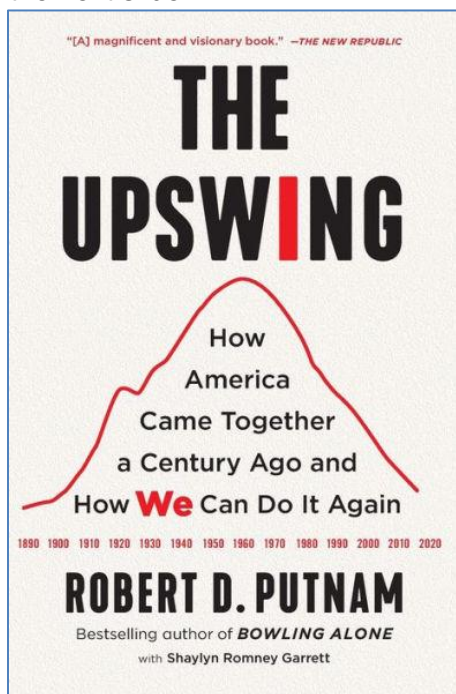
- Thus, the real historical threat revealed by the US 2024 election is growing social isolation and a growing class gap.
- *The Upswing* ➡ (Books by Putnam)
- *Our Kids*

America is very polarized, atomized, unequal, but Trump did not cause that. Trump exploited, to be sure, but an authority, no less than authority than Steve Bannon has said that a book, he said this a couple of months ago, a book by a crazy Harvard professor called *Bowling Alone* was the basis of Trump's strategy. Because something very similar to this. What Bannon said was, we read this book by Putnam *Bowling Alone*, and he saw that he was describing a large fraction of America, not all American. But that was socially isolated, and we

thought, Well, those are going to be right for our kind of authoritarian populism. And he was right, but it certainly turned out to be true. The best predictor of who votes or where people vote for Trump is, in fact, lac of social capital, the idea of social isolation that I talked about.

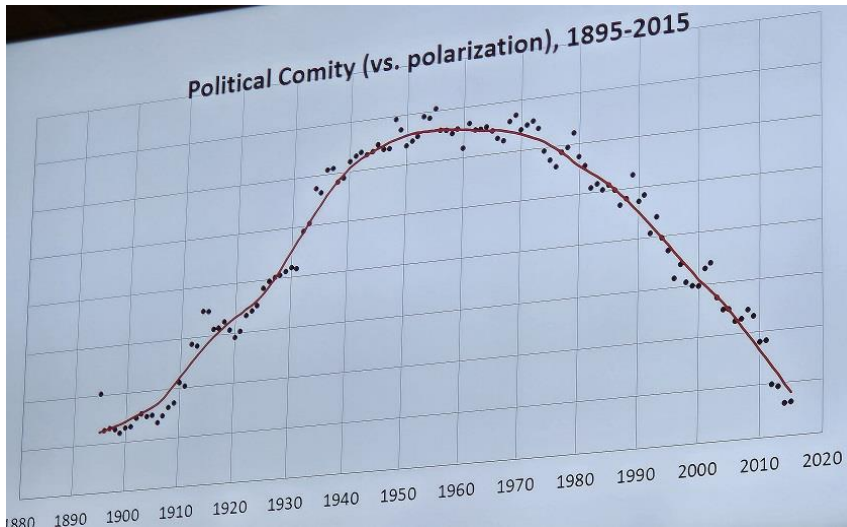


And let's go to the next slide, because this is also true that the real historic threat I'm saying actually, Trump himself didn't cause this. going away. However that happens, is not going to fix the problem. He wasn't causing this consequence of these deeper changes in American society. And the deeper changes are, first of all, growing social isolation, and secondly, a growing aspect in America. Those were both described. And so, if you're thinking in books of mine, you have known the reason. The real threat is the things that cause Trump are right now getting worse. That's what I want to emphasize. So, let's go to the next slide. This is the work I would be drawing here talking about [book that I published](#) five years ago with [Shayln Romney Garrett](#), we have the next slide.



And what this book talked about is that we are at historic levels of political polarization. The extremes of political of economic inequality, is probably the most polarized that we have given our whole history, with the possible exception of the five years between 1860 and 1865. The gap between rich folks and poor folks in America has never, ever in our entire history, been as far as it is now, and the degree of social isolation was a little harder to measure isolation in economic uniform. But still, probably we have never been as socially isolated as we are now. And finally, we've probably never been as self-centered as we are.

Now talk a little bit about the fundamental question of this part of my remarks. We have the next slide now understood by lots and lots of numbers. If you're a numbers person, and some of us are, your time has come. But if you're not a numbers person, that's okay too. Just close your eyes and come back.



Over at the left hand side, we have 1880 but we didn't have any data there, but that's 1890s we start with and over on the far right, these data end in 2015 but actually we're finishing the work for the research for the book. But in fact, we've kept up with what's happening since then, in this graph and all the other graphs that I show you, in fact, if you bought them, up to, where are we now? 2025 the graphs keep going down and down and down.

So you have to imagine, in this graph, if I showed you the graph today, the number

goes off the bottom of the chart. So, we're even, in this case, we're even more polarized than we were when the book was published. Okay, that's the horizontal axis the last one in the 125 years, roughly speaking. And then the vertical axis is one or another of these four variables, in this case, political polarization. Good is up. And that means here, up means political bipartisanship or political comedy. We get those are where the numbers are high. That's when we're in a period of political cooperation and down is where we're polarized.

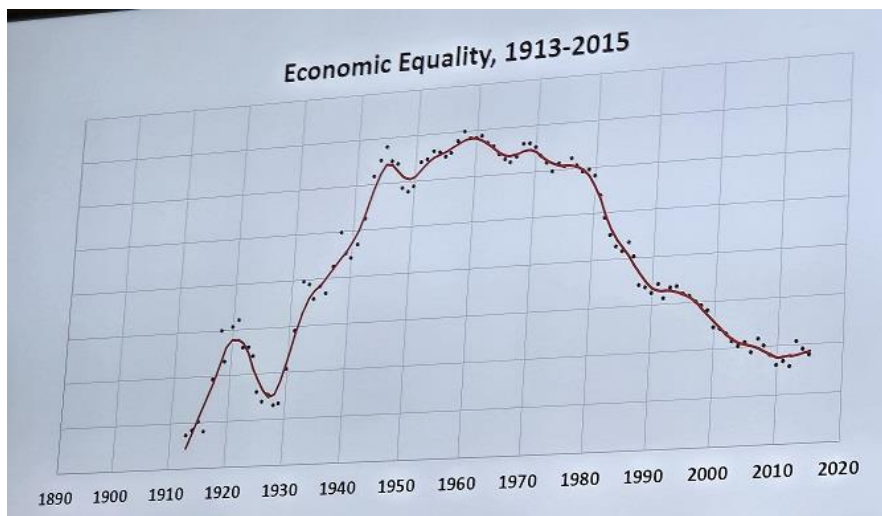
And so, you start over at the lower left hand corner, you can see that in the late 1890s the late last part of the of the 20th of the night of the 19th century, America's politics were very tribal, very polarized, almost no cooperation between Republicans and Democrats. But then, as you see, as the 20th century opened, we were still very polarized. The trend is going a little bit in that progression. You can see that trend, which you can see beginning sort of about 1900 speaking, continues to rise. It goes up during the 20s and during the 30s and during the 40s. Maybe you say that's not the surprising World War Two were a lot of people cooperating across party lines, but then it keeps going up into the 50s and into the 60s, and it was still pretty high. Mixing in American politics was very bipartisan in the 1960s and then when you see that concern in the 1970s it begins to reverse.

[Tom inserts comment here – This is a major oversight in Putnam's analysis. Some things happened in 1981 to trigger ever down trend he has mapped. And that was (1) The Powell Memo, and (2) The rise of the Christian Right and its alliance with Big Business and White Nationalism. This downswing was engineered – it is an intentional outcome of Republican politics and billions of dollars thrown at patient civic work]

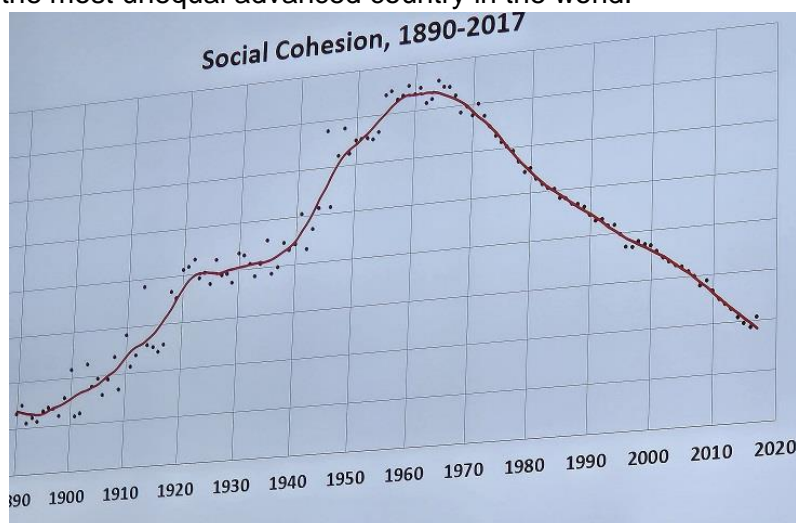
There begins to be a little more political still, not very much. Polarization keeps accelerating. So at the very up top, our president was a guy named Dwight Eisenhower. Dwight Eisenhower was the least partisan president in American history. George Bush was a little less partisan. It was not Eisenhower caused that. He was the result of a period of cooperation,. But then that you can see, in the 1970s we have the next slide.

The actual numbers here don't begin until 1914 because that's when the IRS was invented. That's before we begin to have quite good evidence on economic inequality. That was basically the Gilded Age, where, as the rich folks were living on the upper side of New York and 10 miles south of the Lower East Side of New York, there were poor fellow immigrants. And so that gives, in some sense, that was a really big degree of inequality.

You can see there that beginning in the early 20th century, we began to, we were still pretty unequal, but the direction was going the right direction. And there was a pause during the lowering 20s, when the stock market was taking off and unions were in tough shape in the 1920s that's why there was a dip in the one but then coming even before the New Deal. And you can see, by the 1930s we were already moving upward during World War Two.



I want to convince you how equal we were. In the mid-1960s there were two pretty equal countries in the world alone, much more equal in economic term than any other country in the world. One was socialist Sweden, and the other was capitalist America. We were tied with Sweden the most equal in the world. We're now certainly the most unequal advanced country in the world.

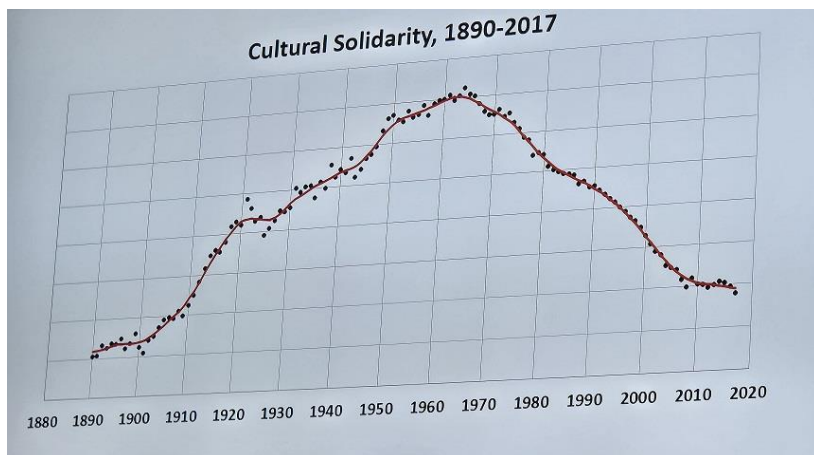


This is the third graph. This shows the view of social cohesion, of what I have sometimes called social capital.

You see, America was socially isolated at the end of the 19th century. That's because in that period, lots of people had just moved from the village was in the countryside, or the village was in Sicily. They left their family and friends and so on behind the old country. And it took me some time to build new connections and new companies. So that's why, historically, it was a period of great social isolation that

people began pretty soon to build new connections and form new ties. Then around the 1930s and 1940s and in the 1960s - especially the middle 1960s - we everybody in America knew everybody, not literally, but I mean, everybody knew their neighbors, and everybody belonged to the PTA or the Rotary. Everybody trusted everybody.

If you're not from that generation, you will not believe it was true. Nobody locked their door. I can't say this to my grandchildren. They find it very hard to believe, when I was their age, nobody knocked their door, but it was true. And then just about the time that I was going off to college and then beginning to vote, that began to turn it deep. The year which these grass halls heard was the first year I personally voted. So there's a hypothesis. Oh no. Oh Dear Bob did it, but then, now it's getting boring. Just every year we knew less. We knew our neighbors less. We trusted our neighbors less. We were bowling alone. We didn't go to church or synagogues.



Let's have the last slide now. I'm turning to cultural solidarity. Up on this chart means we think of ourselves as all in this together. And down is we don't. We think only of self.

We start off at the end of the 19th century in a very "I" centered world. And that's true in our literature, books we read. And by the time we reach the middle of the 20th century, around 1960 America, very much Americans saw ourselves as all in this together.

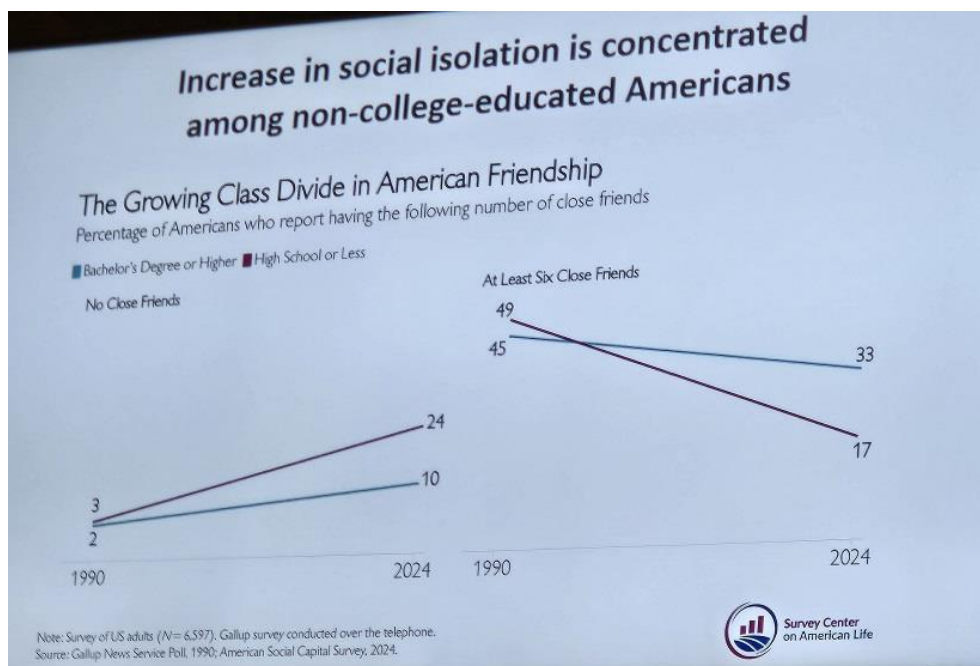
So now, okay, let's put all these slides together. As you can see, they're all the same charts, not four different charts. They're all the same charts. And this one chart summarizes a century and a half at the beginning of this period. We're not surprised. We're very equal, we're very polarized. We're very socially isolated. In the middle of the 20th century, around the roughly speaking, 1960 we're a real society. We're as equal as any place on Earth. Economically, we're all of this together. We are not polarized. The most famous legislation in America passed up at the top of this graph was passed by both parties together. Most of the New Deal legislation was supported by a majority of both parties. The legislation brought in by LBJ, most of it was supported by as many Republicans as Democrats. Most of Reagan's policies was passed with the majority of both Republicans and Democrats.

So far, what have I told you? I told you that America has been over the last 50 years, steadily more unequal, polarized, socially isolated, self-centered. But now what I want to add is that is true of everybody in America. It's even more true of the working and middle class and less true of people who have a college education. Raise your hands if you have a college education.

Whoa. That means that almost all of us in this room are in the upper third of American society, just by having the prized degree, you are in the upper, middle or upper class of America. And we have experience. We also are more socially isolated than people like us used to be. But that threat is even sharper among the two thirds of Americans who don't have a college degree, who graduated high school, or maybe they went to three years of junior college, but they don't have a college degree.

Increasingly, the dividing line in America is not about race. It's, of course, still partly true about race, but it's more about social class. What does that mean?

College educated whites and college educated blacks increasingly share views, and increasingly whites and Latinos and blacks who don't have a college education, they think of themselves as all the have nots, and this graph shows how that's true in social isolation.



The next graph says that the people who have don't have any friends. It's up for our class. The number of working class people, lower middle class people who have no friends at all are is expanding.

Okay, that's finished with the facts, here's the bottom line. The fundamental causes of the crisis of our time are first of all, the shriveled sense of "we." We used to think of ourselves as a we, and now our we has become "me" It's no longer all of us. It's just our kinds of folks. And secondly, it's increasingly class social isolation. It's not just that there's more social isolation. That's especially true for the two terms of this was not completed in college. And finally, it's not just about economics. It's also true of recognition. We not only don't respect working class people, but we hardly recognize them.

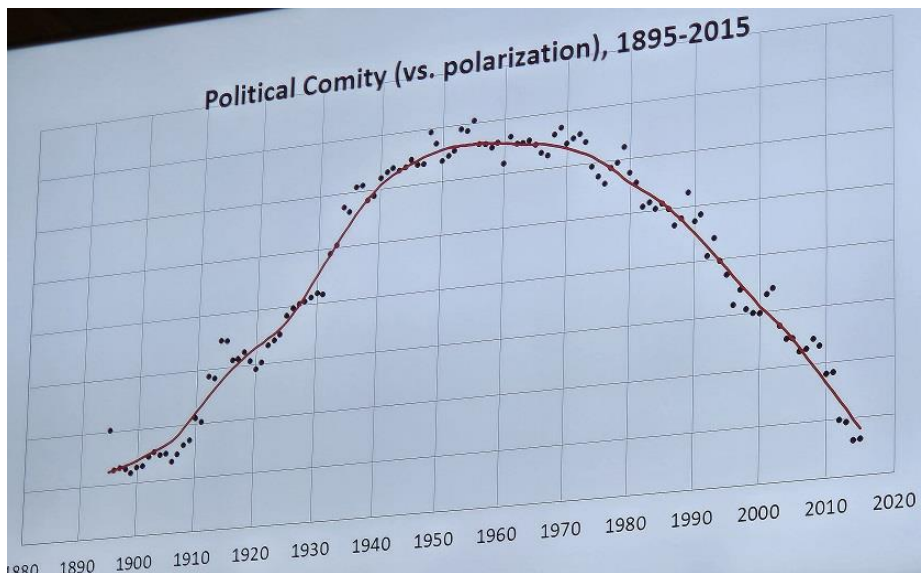
THE BOTTOM LINE

The fundamental causes of our democratic crisis:

- A shriveled sense of 'we'
- Class-based social isolation
- Not just economics, but *recognition*

Don't ignore or belittle the opposition

And that's an important part of this story. I was a senior volunteer because Hillary Clinton's campaign for the presidency. But when she said, "Those people are deplorable," she was conveying this unkind view of them. But what did they think about that? Well, how would you think if somebody called you that? I think if people called me the deplorable, it would be as if I was not there.



Let's have the next slide. I want to go back to this graph just for a second, because everybody looks at this graph, wonders what happened up at the top. And that's an interesting question. Of having to talk about what happened up there over the 60s, what the 60s was, was important. But I want to, I want you to call your attention to the over at the right, the bottom right. That's the more interesting. That's the part, because that's the part of history that was like us. Now, after all, we know they did it, they turned around. So let's look back

at that. We can look back at that period and see what lessons when we draw there are a lot of lessons, but I want to just focus on a few. Let's have the next slide.

Here are four lessons from the last time we successfully got out of this civic pickle.

First of all, the “we” was not inclusive. Along that time - That’s where women got the right to vote, but the Progressive Era was distinctly racist. So, the bottom line is, **this time**, we got to have a more inclusive, racially and socially, in terms of much more inclusive we

Secondly, the progressive people, the who brought about that upturn in that period were

mostly young people. Many of us think of Jane Addams as an old lady, because she got the Nobel Prize in the 1930s, But her work in the progressive movement was when she was in her 20s, not late in life. And that was true almost all of the progressive pioneer. Many of these progressives invented their crucial ideas right here in Chicago.

The Rotary Club was invented in Chicago. Did you know that? And did you help the guy who invented it? He invented the owner, because he said he was lonely. He just moved to Chicago from someplace out in Midwest. And he said, Gosh, I don't have any friends here. How about I invite three friends to have lunch? And gradually they got the idea that we could provide service to other people.

That's what happened the last time. It was young people. Young people sort of like us, but they were much more insistent and productive in the way they produced the sense of social connection. It was young people. And it happened in “flyover” country – not in Washington or some big city.

Raise your hand if you think you know what was the most important social reform of the last 200 years in America? For the first time in world history, Americans invented the high school in 1910. Now we had secondary schools. I'm talking about the idea of the high school, public high school, any town, just because you're in here in town, you get four years of secondary education that happened in America about 1910. And part of what happened, it happened in flyover company. And I mean flyover company, not Chicago, Iowa.

It was the most important event in American history, because that alone triggered most of our economic growth for the entire 20th century, just that one thing, because for the whole 20th century, our working class was much better educated than any other working class in the world. And within 20 years, every community in America had a public high school.

[NOTE BY TOM – this is a wonderful evocation of what I call the mandate or movement for MORE PUBLIC. Only this kind of national, public investment can truly deliver universal social and economic change. Not charity, and certainly NOT the marketplace.]

Now am at the last point I want to make, but it's most important for you. Can we figure out what was upstream of all these changes? So that happened last. What came first? And this is the most important point I now come from athletics to what I want to tell you, the first thing to change, was not economics, was not politics, was not even social isolation - it was moral and cultural change. The first thing that happened both on the way up in the

FOUR LESSONS FROM AMERICA'S LAST UPSWING

- “We” Not Inclusive Enough
- Driven by Youth
- Grassroots Innovation Led
- Moral and Cultural Shift Led

BUT- Merle & Tom note that, while in past, there were Presidents who HELPED the Upswing - now there is an autocrat who is making it impossible to recover.

1880s 1890s and on the way down in 1960s 50s and 60s, the first thing that changed was our sense of what we owed to other people.

It was a moral revolution. And by moral, I don't mean sexual morality. I mean just the sense that we have an obligation for other people.

And now this is the last story I want to tell you. On Union Square in New York City there is a building with a very important historical story. It was the home of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company – a sweatshop owner in 1910 locked the doors, and when a fire started, and all of these workers – mostly young women, mostly young Jewish immigrants were trapped. And 100 or so jumped to their death. There was a young woman, a young debutante, who was having lunch with her fellow debutantes on the other side of the square. And they walked out to watch this disaster. She was quite wealthy, and she looked up and saw these young women jumping with her death, and she had a moral epiphany. At that moment, she said, my life is not about me. It's about us. It's about all of us, not just we debutantes, but all these Americans, including the American, young immigrant Americans, were just jumped to their death. At that moment, her life changed because she her, she had a moral awakening for other people. Later, she became the Fire Commissioner of New York City, and she worked New York City government, and then New York State Governments came to the attention of First of all, Theodore Roosevelt and then FDR. Some of you will know that she eventually became the first woman cabinet member in of American history, Secretary of Labor – [Frances Perkins](#).

She personally is responsible for Social Security and unemployment insurance, all the things that we associate with a decent life came from a young woman. A young woman who had a moral epiphany, and she saw those women, young women falling to their death, and she said, I'm going to change America because I have a moral obligation to them.

Though it may not be quite as dramatic, but that's what it's going to look like. I'm now speaking to you. A lot of things have to happen, but the first thing that has to happen is that we, you and your children have got to start paying attention to other people. We are our neighbor's keepers. Thank you very much.

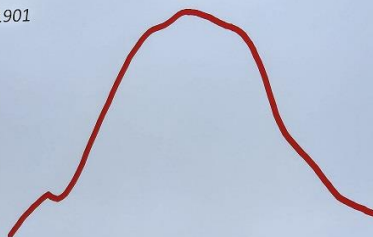
*“The fundamental weakness of
Western civilization is empathy.”*

Elon Musk, February 28 2025

They believe...

*“The fundamental rule of our national life—the rule
which underlies all others—is that on the whole, and
in the long run, we shall go up or down together.”*

President Theodore Roosevelt, 1901



WE must practice...

JOIN THE MOVEMENT!



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