



CONGRESSMAN'S REPORT

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Is The System Working? Six Thousand Arizonans Sound Off

In nearly every one of 11 years in Washington I've used the Congressional questionnaire as a means to get your *opinions* on issues and legislation (should we end the draft? build the SST? pass Medicare?) This year, troubled by an increasingly pessimistic and discouraged flow of mail, I decided on an entirely different and experimental approach that might help all of us understand the source of a new unhappiness with government and society. Instead of opinions, this year I asked for your *experiences*. This is my report on the 6,000 responses that came back from my January mailing to every home in the 2nd Congressional District.

The hundreds of letters I get every week have always been a varied lot. But for the last two or three years there has been an ever larger proportion of complaints about our complex society and the government that controls much of it. "Nothing works any more;" "government can't be reached or doesn't respond" -- these are the themes I hear much more often these days, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about "the system" -- what it means, where it fails, and what it ought to be.

It seems to me that much of what we hear about the worsening "quality of life" can be traced to the faulty workings of a society in which, whether by choice or not, we are all involved from birth to death. The simpler days are gone, and the hard fact is that every step we take -- paying a bill by mail, or buying a house, or getting to work in the morning -- is shaped by a huge, impersonal network of institutions and machines. It is this network -- "the system" -- which increasingly controls our lives and determines whether they are rewarding or unpleasant.

In this year's questionnaire, I listed thirteen broad problem areas and then asked you to do two things: check each category in which you felt you had a current problem (the results are listed below), and then pick out the *one* problem bothering you most and give me a detailed description of it.

Many people objected to the pessimistic format of a questionnaire that defined things in terms of what's wrong. One clergyman suggested that I try to change the "current jargon from 'problems' to 'opportunities.'" There is something in what he says. For if 6,000 adults answered my invitation to write about what's wrong, then maybe 287,000 adult Arizonans were not interested or troubled enough to bother. Their lives may be perfectly happy and rewarding. But the group that did reply suggests that there are thousands of Arizonans who are unhappy and frustrated people.

HOW THE CATEGORIES STACKED UP

In the remaining space I propose to let my respondents tell their own stories in excerpts from typical replies. But let me first register the major reactions I had after I had read through the responses:

- ** *Government -- at all levels -- really isn't delivering service the way it ought to. People are cynical about politicians who overpromise and underdeliver, and they're not really optimistic that government is going to become more responsive.*
- ** *The American consumer is completely dissatisfied with products that don't work, don't last, and destroy the environment.*
- ** *The system (or non-system) by which this country tries to give its people medical care is in very serious straits and needs changing.*
- ** *The way we treat older people is a disgrace.*
- ** *Crime -- particularly violent street crime -- and court delays are destroying faith in our legal system*
- ** *Welfare is a mess -- an aggravating burden for those who pay for it and destructive for those who receive it.*

Here is the frequency with which the thirteen categories were checked, each respondent checking as many areas as he chose:

COST OF LIVING	46.3%
MEDICAL	42.6%
CONSUMER	39.2%
CRIME	38.3%
BUREAUCRACY	28.5%
INSURANCE	21.5%
PUBLIC ASSISTANCE	21.5%
EDUCATION	18.4%
UNEMPLOYMENT	17.9%
HOUSING	17.2%
MILITARY	16.0%
*POLLUTION (a write-in)	6.9%
RURAL	6.7%
BUSINESS	6.3%

*Note: I had assumed that people would relate concern about pollution through other categories. Many of them did. But others wrote it in as a separate category.

OUR MOST TRAGIC WASTE

Some soft-drink manufacturer a few years ago dreamed up the term "throw-away bottle," and to an increasing degree we seem to live in a "throw-away society." We started out discarding gadgets, bottles, garbage and eight-year-old cars. Now we seem to have gone on to "throw-away" traditions, customs, and -- if my questionnaire is any guide -- we are threatening to develop a whole class of "throw-away people." I'm not talking about minorities, or the handicapped. For my survey indicates that the 20,000,000 people over 65 are the most overlooked, misunderstood, and unhappy segment of our population.

"I have worked hard all my life and paid into Social Security. I work as much as I can without forfeiting my S.S. benefits (I can make \$1,680 per year.) But my total income is less than I can possibly live on. I have gone through my savings, had to sell my house because of higher and higher property taxes and don't know which way to turn. I live in constant fear of illness, which would spell doom for me financially, and wonder what will happen when I can no longer work at all."

Sometimes illness had already struck and the writer was totally destitute.

Income, food, medical care, transportation, and housing are the great problems of old age -- the same difficulties that younger and middle-aged people face, but for an older person who cannot work, these troubles are insurmountable. Often a grown son or daughter who is striving to contribute to a parent's care is affected too.

RUNNING IN PLACE

"...a salary that was considered substantial two years ago is no longer sufficient."

"if I live 10 more years, my income will be decreased at the end of that time by one fourth. It appears that our economic system is stealing from me the fruits of 40 years of hard work in which I saved enough to keep me in my old age."

Inflation and the cost of living came out in the survey as the problem most often cited. "Spending money as if it were going out of style" used to be a joke, but it seems that the dollar is going out of style, penny by penny. People feel they are getting less and less for their money, and poorer quality for rising cost. Last fall's wage-price freeze, necessary as it was, was so mishandled that it helped big business and took advantage of the "little guy" who feels he still hasn't recovered.

Through these letters ran a common theme: it's not so much that everything costs more, and that the government takes more, but that "what you get" is no longer satisfactory.

DEFINING NECESSITIES

"I find it very difficult to think of even one major consumer item that lasts longer than its counterpart of 20 years ago. 'Trick the public into buying what they don't

need, then build it to fall apart so they'll have to buy another one.' This seems to be the credo of American entrepreneurs today. Is this the only way to keep our economy "rolling along?" If so, then there must be something seriously wrong with our economic system. Who's to blame? labor -- for wanting a bigger share of the profits? business -- for being just plain greedy? consumers -- for allowing themselves to be led around by the nose? or government for allowing it all to happen?"

Have we been "led around by the nose?" This country has always offered its citizens "the good life" in terms of material goods -- we have the newest, the shiniest, the most, and until recently, the most comfortable and the best. But these days the consumer often finds his money won't buy good housing, safe, low-maintenance cars, reliable appliances, or even assurance that his family gets nutritious food.

Maybe we need to think about what "necessities" really are. If they are what *we need to live*, then these are the things we would die without: air, water, food, space, shelter, clothing, medicine -- in that order. It is frightening to think that three of these things were once taken for granted in this country and are now beginning to cost money, as clean air, pure water, and adequate space come to depend on whether one can afford to live in an unpolluted and decently-designed area.

SHELTER AND TRANSPORTATION

"When we moved into our house seven months ago we found that the contractor had installed a chipped bathtub. The lighting fixtures were defective. . .three times the floor covering men have had to re-lay the kitchen floor due to defective vinyl. We have had walls break open and the house flooded after the first rainstorm. . ."

"Something must be done to limit the landlords from charging unreasonable rents. . .knowing that the student [or the old or lower-income person] is unable to find housing elsewhere. . ."

Housing in the Tucson area is an example of a necessity that has become nearly unobtainable. Shoddy construction, inferior building materials, contractors' delays, and broken promises were often cited by home buyers who felt they have very little chance of redress.

Renters also feel helpless. And too often new housing is built more with the profits than the needs of the community in mind.

Another obvious case of a necessity that has become riddled with difficulty is the automobile. We have built our cities, towns and places of work around it, and almost everyone has one -- or two or three. For most families it is a major investment and if it is not well made, constant repairs can spell financial hardship and perpetual inconvenience for the unfortunate owner.

And car insurance was, next to medical insurance, the greatest financial burden for my respondents. Past record is considered in determining the premiums, making it impossible for some to have insurance at all. Many suggested "no-fault insurance" to alleviate this situation.

"None of us drink or take drugs. Why should we pay for the wrecks the drunks and dopers have?"

"Insurance companies discriminate against senior drivers. It doesn't make any difference whether they have a good record or not. They up the premium. . ."

"I wish there was a way we could purchase a policy and keep it just the way we signed up originally, without the company playing God with our purse strings each year."

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

From a doctor:

"Medical Insurance is probably a 'must legislation' if we are to preserve either compassion or dignity in our individual patients. I fear that now only the very rich or the very poor can *afford* adequate medical care."

And from patients and their relatives:

"My husband and I are broke from the high cost of illness and have had to borrow money -- we had to pay \$67 a day for a hospital bed alone. All other things extra. In one month our bill was \$4000. . .doctors all extra. We are 59 and 55 years old -- not old enough for Medicare or Social Security. If only *some* program could be worked out for people like us."

"I can't get any insurance because my wife is a diabetic so you see what I am up against. I would like to see a National Health Plan run by Uncle Sam that would cover all Americans, including the so-called *uninsurables* like my wife. . ."

From reading the questionnaires, where medical care showed up as number two problem for my constituents, one might gather that every family that has had a major illness in the last few years was all but wiped out. And private insurance policies can be cancelled after a serious illness.

Medicare, cited as a blessing by those eligible for it, nevertheless does not cover eye or dental problems serious as these can be for the aged -- and can disallow treatment already received as "unnecessary" when the patient has had to take the doctor's word for its necessity.

SAFE STREETS, SAFE HOMES

I agree with a man who wrote to me:

"The difficulty of enforcing laws indicates a deeper illness, one that cannot be legislated. The desire to conform with law must come from within and law enforcement is only treating a symptom."

People looked back with nostalgia at the time when they could leave doors unlocked, walk through any part of the city at any time of night without fear. The risk and fear of street crime -- and the rumor of street crime -- militate against the good life for us all. Organized crime is disheartening in a different way, making us feel that things are rotten at a higher level. Recent publicity about prisons has given us the feeling that our treatment of criminals makes no sense and that our "correctional" institutions really don't correct but instead produce more criminals.

In our changing culture, many things made illegal in the past strike people today as merely immoral or eccentric.

"A large part of the time of courts and police is spent enforcing the laws against (those) whose "crimes" hurt only themselves. . . : narcotics addicts, alcoholics, homosexuals, prostitutes, producers and possessors of pornography, etc. . . . the courts are also clogged with divorce and insurance cases which, with proper legislation, could be solved without court action."

The difficulty seems to lie in defining "victimless" crimes. At present we are all victims of contempt for law, physical risk and a sense of unease that erode the good life as surely as a constant infection erodes good health.

THE LITTLE GUY VERSUS THE MACHINE

"Many government institutions have become so big that I have little or no control over the way they affect my life. Most decisions affecting my way of life are made by the 'powers that be' and not by me."

Another aspect of this feeling that nothing makes sense is of course bureaucracy. Red tape, rudeness, and indifference on the part of public servants, impersonality, the proliferation of agencies and the phrase "unresponsive government" were mentioned in hundreds of letters.

"I phoned a number listed in the telephone directory re a welfare matter. The answering party knew nothing and gave me another phone number. A total of 17 numbers were given me before I spoke to the right party."

Predictably the IRS forms were bitterly criticized.

One man went so far as to send the IRS a blank check with the note, "You figure it out!" It was, of course, returned.

Experiences like these, which we have all had, contribute to the meaninglessness of life, not because of their seriousness but because of their frequency. Under the heading "Bureaucracy" everything from nepotism to junketing Congressmen came in for its knocks. But somehow all the complaints were related. All of them indicated despair over a government machine -- federal, state, county, and local -- that doesn't care.

THE OTHER GUY -- PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

"It is disheartening that the working man is expected to help support so many people. There are a lot of people on some kind of public assistance who don't deserve it."

"The indignities and uncertainties [welfare recipients] must undergo are not in keeping with basic humanitarian principles."

Most people object to paying taxes to support "those who *won't* work." On the other hand, people in authentically desperate straits wrote that because of technicalities they did not qualify for any or enough public assistance. Everyone seems to recognize that there must be some assistance for those who *can't* work. At least the first 16 years of a person's life and probably the last ten or twenty years, with life expectancy increasing as it is, are *not* working years. If people are not supported by their families during those 26-36 years, or if they have not been able to provide for their own old age, no one wants to see them go hungry, particularly the children.

And yet welfare abuse is understandably a very sore point. There *are* some chiselers on the welfare rolls, and when a big boondoggle comes to light it is disheartening to those who work and pay high taxes. Welfare needs restructuring, not only to eliminate the possibility of cheating but to change the "system" that keeps people on welfare for two or three generations. The present system does not restore families to the work-force as it encourages able-bodied men to desert their families.

SOCIAL SECURITY -- AN EARNED RIGHT

"I receive \$51 per month minimum. . .farmer all my life but self-employed farmers not covered till 1955. Those were the years of my decline. . .drought, health expenses, death in family, nervous breakdown. . Just barely able to qualify for self-employed farmer's social security. I will not ask for welfare or food stamps. I live in an old shack without plumbing or adequate heating. I have no transportation and too old to walk far for necessities. I pay no rent. My home is very old and the wind blew a corner off the roof. I own this property but cannot keep it up any more. . . I worked hard in old days when I could. Built miles of fences, raised and sold tons of beef. Raised wheat and alfalfa. I am not a bum, just old now. My circumstances are awful bad. If only the minimum social security could be raised but it is getting too late for me but maybe there are others that could be helped."

"The term 'Social Security' is misleading advertising which causes a great many of our young people to take for granted a suitable retirement income and fail to make proper savings for the future. The name of this program should be changed to

'Federal Supplemental Income," or some such, and the fact that it will not provide social security at retirement should be widely publicized."

"A couple on Social Security have absolutely nothing left after they pay the taxes, utility bills and groceries. One solution is being able to earn more than \$1,680 when you are on Social Security and not lose your benefit."

So many wrote to me in bitterness and shock having found that their benefit was not enough to live on, that I would have to agree that a re-education program is in order. Social Security is an earned right. It was never meant to replace completely the income a person loses at retirement, but with the way things are now it is frequently not even an adequate supplement, and I believe the Congress must do something to bring the benefit rates up to adequate levels.

PUBLIC EDUCATION: ITS SUPPORT AND ITS QUALITY

Property taxes are another way in which the old suffer. Two or three wrote that they had had to sell their houses, which they owned outright, because their pensions did not increase with taxes levied to support public schools. Their own children had left school long ago, and they didn't see why they had to bear the burden of educating other people's children.

It is agreed that there must be public education, but there is a great deal of controversy about what should be taught and how.

Low pay, too many non-teaching duties, over-crowded classes, low morale, and lack of funds and facilities can combine to make it almost impossible for teachers to do a good job.

I received a thoughtful analysis of the class response to my questionnaire from an American Problems class in a Tucson high school. These students mentioned, in their comments on drug abuse, that drugs were readily obtainable even in school. This suggests that there's a lot more to the "problem of education" now than there used to be, and many hinted at a real over-haul of the philosophy of education.

REDEFINING OURSELVES

"I was watching TV the other night and it showed B-52 bombers going to bomb in Laos and along the North Vietnam border. Cost: \$1 million plus per day. Yet, we have hungry children in southern Arizona and many other places."

The Viet Nam war has certainly produced a great deal of waste, material and spiritual, and has, I think, been a great factor in making us reconsider what we are and what we want as a nation. There were a few letters protesting the end of the war without a military victory, but many wrote about the disillusionment with their country because of our continuing involvement.

This is just one aspect of the waste this war has brought on -- whether in the loss of lives, the life-long disablement of good and honorable men, the unresolved imprisonment of untold numbers of other Americans, the anguish of families whose loved ones are missing.

It is to be hoped that the most frequent complaints about the military and the draft as they are now will be solved, eventually, by the Modern Volunteer Army being created now.

MORE THROW-AWAY PEOPLE

Military personnel problems have their parallel in the civilian sector with industry lay-offs and business shutdowns. Unemployment is a problem for veterans, disabled laborers who know no other work, and highly trained professionals who are unable to find work in their field of expertise.

"In answer to the call for scientific personnel issued in the late 50's and early 60's, . . . many of us pursued our college education to a Ph.D. degree. Now we find we are unable to apply our advanced training because we are not employed."

The problem of the over-40 overqualified professional out of a job is nationwide at the moment. Retraining is the only answer I can see. We cannot let a person who has trained hard to serve a national need of any kind become a drop-out from the work force and suffer the financial hardship and emotional misery of unemployment in a society that has always had a "work ethic."

DISAPPEARING BREEDS

From a farmer:

"We are the dirty guys who burn fields (or poison predators), spray insecticides, herbicides, etc. that contaminate the air. We pay starvation wages to our help. We get 'free' money to not grow crops and thousands of dollars for growing others. . . no one sees the other side of the picture. . . prior to this year, the price of cotton was half what it was 15 years ago. Alfalfa is the same as it was 30 years ago. . . Our expenses, however, have more than doubled. . ."

And from a small businessman:

"The small businessman must become a dying breed in the United States if he does not receive aid in reducing the exorbitant overhead due to: higher federal income tax rates; high FICA for employees and owner; high insurance rates for employees; high state and local tax rates; high insurance rates for general liability; unemployment taxes; employers' fringe benefits such as medical insurance, retirement plans, etc.:, for which costs are now prohibitive."

If ever there are no small local businesses and farms, American life will have become even more depersonalized, and probably its "quality" will worsen still more.

POLLUTION AND POPULATION

From a student:

"Nothing else matters, whether taxes are fair, segregation is necessary, business should be controlled, how the future looks, will I be rich -- if I cannot step outside my home and breathe."

And this:

"People!! Traffic congestion. Lines of people! Crowded parks and vacation areas. People displacing natural wildlife, plants and flowers. More and more housing developments taking over the natural land. Cement instead of cactus and Palo Verde trees."

And yet there were letters like the following:

"I realize that the pollution problem is a real one and that we must try and solve this problem, but not at the expense of putting hundreds of men out of work. . . Unemployment and poverty is a kind of population, too, that should be number one problem for state and federal government, but there are no dates set to eliminate them. . ."

Asthmatics and others with respiratory ailments who came to Tucson for their health now have as many bad days as good days.

"Cough! Cough! Gasp! I can remember in the 1950's we could see the mountains from downtown Tucson. . ."

WHAT MUST BE DONE

America's traditional attribute has been optimism. If we can isolate and define our problems we can solve them. I put down these stacks of pessimistic and unhappy mail with the feeling that we ought to try to get back together again, that we can search for and find ways to give people hope; to make civil servants more civil and more inclined to give service; to enlist the idealism and enthusiasm of young people; to regain our sense of community and optimism.

I came away from this interesting experiment with a determination that in 1972 -- and after -- this one congressman is going to be working on an action program which will include these things:

- ** *Find ways for government at all levels to treat people they're supposed to serve the way good businessmen treat customers -- and really give good service. For example, there is no reason why agencies that sell stamps, process Social Security, give licenses, etc. can't have Saturday or evening hours. Banks and supermarkets do it and so should government.*
- ** *Simplify the federal tax laws -- an old idea -- but really produce a short form on which an ordinary, honest man can figure his own taxes.*
- ** *Get moving right now on some kind of sensible national health insurance. Advanced medical care is now possible and must be made available to all Americans.*
- ** *Push for strong legislation to protect the consumer and help find ways that consumers can band together to get better merchandise and lower costs for car and title insurance, appliances and all the rest.*
- ** *Back any legislation that offers a better way of handling Social Security, Medicare, or any of the other programs we have to help our senior citizens.*



A handwritten signature in cursive ink, appearing to read "Harry S. Truman". The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the "n" in "Harry".