

HENRY J. AARON
JAMES M. LINDSAY
PIETRO S. NIVOLA

1

An Agenda for the Nation

The United States has entered the twenty-first century in a unique position. The U.S. economy is more than twice the size of that of its nearest competitor. America's armed forces have no rivals. Our scientists are preeminent in most fields. The rest of the world thirsts for U.S. goods and services—from pharmaceutical products, computer software, and the bounty of U.S. farms to blue jeans, fast food, motion pictures, television programs, and popular music—even as it sometimes frets about American cultural and economic domination.

America's unequalled power presents new opportunities to influence the course of history. Whether we make the most of them will depend on how well the nation copes with novel perils and obligations. Brookings first published a collection of essays entitled *Agenda for the Nation* thirty-five years ago. The difficulties the nation faced then differed from those before it today. At home, the efforts to provide equal rights to African Americans, provide a safety net for the poor, and reverse urban decay dominated the agenda. Overseas, the United States sought to contain the Soviet Union, fight an increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam, and salvage the international system of fixed exchange rates.

Many of these troubles have passed or diminished. The Soviet Union is gone. The Vietnam War is a distant memory. International currency exchanges rates fluctuate more or less freely now in response to market

forces. African Americans have made substantial economic and social gains. Even if equality remains elusive, race is a less tortured and combustible issue than it once was. Many major cities have revived.

The domestic challenges the United States faces today include encouraging strong sustained economic growth, ensuring fair but affordable access to health care, shoring up retirement income for an aging population, and reconciling energy policies with environmental concerns. In foreign affairs the central task is to use America's unprecedented power wisely and to protect a homeland that has been revealed as shockingly vulnerable.

Such challenges are formidable. Spending on health care, for example, has more than doubled as a share of national output in this country since *Agenda for the Nation* first appeared. Health care now accounts for one dollar in every seven of gross domestic product. At the same time, more than 40 million Americans lack any health insurance at all, and their number is growing. Projections indicate that health care will claim an ever-increasing share of national income as the population ages and as science generates costly revolutionary medical advances. No nation, however prosperous, can afford the staggering cost of adopting every beneficial diagnostic and therapeutic procedure that modern medical science conceives. Even the richest of nations will be burdened by the great expense of servicing an elderly population that is likely to expect not only high-quality medical services, but also adequate public and private pension benefits.

September 11 profoundly sobered the national mood. Whether America prudently confronts the problems it faces or fritters its energies on lesser preoccupations will depend in no small part on the fortitude of American political institutions. Future generations, here and abroad, will look back on the first decades of the twenty-first century and judge whether we Americans properly balanced boldness and wisdom, modesty and self-confidence, patience and daring—whether, that is, we met seriously the demands of the American Age.

Health and Well-Being

The Constitution calls on the government to “promote the general Welfare.” How well this responsibility is discharged will determine in no small part the quality of our lives and that of our children's and whether the United States will grow stronger or weaker as a nation.

Economic Growth

America's fortunes both at home and abroad rest on a foundation of strong economic growth. Growth results from improvements in human capital as embodied in the skills and experience of the labor force, from expansion of physical capital in the form of plant and equipment, and from progress in science, engineering, and management. Improvements in the education, experience, and health of American workers were major contributors to America's great economic success in the twentieth century. But, as Bradford DeLong, Claudia Goldin, and Lawrence Katz argue in chapter 2, the prospects for continued improvement of human capital are cloudy. Younger cohorts now are only marginally better educated than baby-boomers. The share of experienced workers in the labor force will diminish as the highly experienced and productive baby boom generation ages and retires. Government assistance can help expand opportunities for education, especially for children from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups.

Increases in physical capital require investment, but a country cannot invest more than it saves or borrows abroad. Relying on borrowing, however, implies that much of the direct return from investment will flow to foreign owners. During the 1990s, U.S. private saving remained low compared with domestic saving in previous decades and with saving in foreign countries. Various public policies have sought to increase private saving in the United States. Unfortunately, they have not succeeded. Large government deficits subtracted from saving in the 1980s and early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, a combination of spending cuts, tax increases, and resurgent productivity growth had converted deficits to surpluses. Domestically financed investment boomed. Then the 2001 tax cut, a recession, and increased defense spending following September 11, 2001, halted the brief interlude of budget surpluses. Heavy borrowing to finance the government's budgetary shortfalls and the erosion of national saving resumed. Prospects for continued large additions to the U.S.-owned stock of physical capital are thus unclear.

Additions to the stock of knowledge probably provide the best hope for long-range economic expansion. The revolutions in computers and communications at first seemed to do little to boost productivity, but they sharply increased it in the late 1990s. The biomedical revolution based on molecular biology is emerging as a major potential force for economic growth and human welfare. No recipe for promoting economic growth is

foolproof, but low saving and failure to improve human resources can assuredly discourage it. DeLong, Goldin, and Katz argue that our best shot is to make sure that Americans from all backgrounds are well educated, that fiscal policy does not divert private saving from productive investments, and that public and private support for science is sustained.

Inequality

The U.S. economy is growing, but unevenly. Some Americans are enjoying enormous increases in their incomes, others almost none. What are the likely consequences of the nation's increased economic inequality? Gary Burtless and Christopher Jencks tackle this question in chapter 3. In the year 2000, they report, inequality was higher than it had been for sixty years. Virtually all income growth during the boom times of the 1990s was concentrated among the fortunate top 10 percent of the income distribution, particularly among the top 1 percent. The main reason for rising *income* inequality is increasing *earnings* inequality. Technological change has increased the relative compensation of the well educated, who were already at the top of the earnings distribution. Immigration has also swelled the ranks of the poorly educated and poorly paid.

How much inequality matters, and what, if anything, government should do about it, remain perplexing questions. Burtless and Jencks observe that inequality does not appear to be correlated with the growth rates of economies. The evidence is unclear whether inequality diminishes the chances of low-income children to climb the economic ladder. The impact inequality may have on health and longevity is at best small. Nonetheless, economic inequality probably helps tilt political influence in favor of the wealthy.

Government Spending and Taxes

America's continuing ability to sustain its public commitments—domestic and foreign—requires sound management of public finances. As Alan Auerbach and his coauthors show in chapter 4, current public policy is failing this test. In January 2001 the Congressional Budget Office had projected a \$5.6 trillion budget surplus over the decade from 2002 to 2011. Two years later that projected surplus had turned into a projected deficit of almost \$400 billion. The sources of the deterioration are clear—a mixture of recession, increased spending (in part owing to security-related exigencies following September 11, 2001), and reduced revenues resulting from large tax cuts. Even the official projections understate the probable shortfall

because they are based on questionable assumptions and methods. In particular, they assume unrealistically low rates of growth in government spending and unrealistically high revenue.

Under more plausible assumptions, the projected budget deficits would cumulate to approximately \$1.1 trillion over the period from 2004 to 2013. Auerbach and his associates argue that immediate measures should be taken to reverse the medium- and long-term deficits. Failure to do so will impede economic growth over the long run. Thriftier fiscal policy now is important also because the first baby boomers will become eligible for Social Security benefits beginning in 2008 and for Medicare in 2011. Federal budget obligations for the elderly and disabled will climb steadily for three decades thereafter.

Health

As Victor Fuchs and Alan Garber explain in chapter 5, the health of U.S. residents is better now than it has ever been, but worse on average than that of residents of many other developed nations. The reason the health of Americans lags behind that of residents of several other rich nations is not that Americans spend too little on health care. Indeed, *per capita* health care spending in the United States in 1999 was 77 percent greater than it was in Canada, the second-biggest spender in the world. Moreover, expenditures are certain to grow. Technological advances promise to continue extending the already lavish menu of medical interventions. A confusing multiplicity of payment mechanisms, public and private, means that payers lack sufficient leverage over how much is spent on health care. The largest public programs—Medicare (for the aged and disabled) and Medicaid (for the indigent)—face sharply rising costs that will strain or outrun current revenue sources.

Further complicating matters, more than 40 million people were uninsured in 2001, and the ranks of the uninsured are growing. The lack of insurance, long a serious problem, has been tolerable only because physicians and hospitals have been willing and able to provide uncompensated care to the uninsured. The continuing availability of uncompensated care is now in jeopardy. Public and private payers are trying to limit payments for patients to no more than the actual cost of care. Such hard bargaining is to be expected in the context of sharp medical cost increases. However, the decline in uncompensated care could leave the uninsured bereft of care.

Fuchs and Garber stress the vast potential for medical innovation to improve the quality and availability of care. Progress in basic science means

that the prospects for medical breakthroughs have never been better. A possible dark side of the flood of highly beneficial but pricey advances is that costs could increase so much that access to the latest treatments would be limited to the wealthy and to the well insured. Should this risk become reality, Fuchs and Garber warn, the United States and other rich nations would confront moral and political choices of extraordinary complexity. Because not everyone will have access to all beneficial care, the authors suggest, ethically troubling choices will be inescapable in the future. Fuchs and Garber recommend a major national commitment to a center that would systematically assess the gains and costs from new technologies.

Pensions

The federal government's deteriorating budgetary picture and the aging of the baby boom generation raise important questions about what kind of financial security Americans can expect in their retirement years. Social Security and its well-known projected long-term deficit have been the object of much study and debate. As William Gale and Peter Orszag note in chapter 6, the other two pillars of retirement income—private saving and pensions—have received far less attention but also face severe stresses. The private saving rate has plummeted over the past two decades. Half of all workers—and most low-income workers—have no pension at all. The shift from defined benefit plans, which guarantee retirees a percentage of past average earnings, raises additional concerns about the security of the pensions that workers are now accruing.

Workers are increasingly covered entirely or predominantly by defined contribution plans, under which employers deposit a percentage of workers' earnings in individually owned accounts that workers may invest subject to certain guidelines. How much workers with defined contribution plans have at retirement depends not only on what they earned during their working years, but also on how skillfully they invested and how well financial markets performed. Even sophisticated investors make mistakes or suffer bad luck. Inexperienced workers, especially those with few assets other than their pensions, are particularly vulnerable to financial devastation from such error or bad luck.

The prospects for constructive near-term action to shore up the Social Security system for the long term are not promising. Gale and Orszag hold out somewhat greater hopes for reform of private pensions. They review leading proposals for sweeping overhauls, but suggest that more modest

incremental changes might achieve more. These changes would enable workers to allocate part of *future* pay raises to saving plans, discourage workers from withdrawing money from retirement accounts before they retire, and improve financial education and investment advice for workers. Such actions might raise the chances that workers would reach retirement with sufficient assets to sustain their preretirement standards of living.

Diversity

Three decades of increased immigration are remaking America's racial and ethnic mix. A country conditioned to think of diversity in terms of black and white continues to be enriched by other hues, as James Lindsay and Audrey Singer explain in chapter 7. The percentage of Americans who identify themselves as "Hispanic" nearly doubled between 1980 and 2000, while the percentage who identify themselves as "Asian" more than doubled. Meanwhile, the percentage of Americans who identify themselves as multiracial also continues to grow.

The rapidity of America's demographic changes has heightened fears that immigration might undermine America's social cohesion. Some fear that newcomers will not integrate into mainstream society as readily as past immigrants did, and they fear that national unity will suffer as a result. Yet Lindsay and Singer foresee no looming immigration crisis. Although today's immigrants mostly hail from outside of Europe and Americans seem to have become more tolerant of cultural differences, the forces of assimilation are nearly as strong today as they were early in the twentieth century, the time of America's last great influx of newcomers. Lindsay and Singer acknowledge that immigration creates stresses, but suggest that the remedy is to assist immigrants once they arrive, not to keep them out. Government and civil society can do much to encourage immigrants to become citizens, help their economic advancement, and defuse the social tensions that may arise when newcomers rapidly reshape existing communities.

Energy and the Environment

Energy and environmental policies are inextricably linked, as Howard Gruenspecht and Paul Portney point out in chapter 8. Yet the federal government is not organized to reflect this interdependence. Instead, authority is spread across many poorly coordinated agencies: the Department of Transportation handles fuel economy standards; the Environmental Protection Agency has responsibility for vehicle emissions standards; the

Treasury Department has the lead in setting any energy tax policy. All these bureaus have more say about the nation's consumption of oil than does the Department of Energy (DOE).

Gruenspecht and Portney argue that the diffusion of authority for energy and environmental management across multiple agencies imposes substantial penalties. It prevents government from identifying and resolving policy conflicts, and it hampers efforts to design strategies that would harmonize energy and environmental objectives.

While a wholesale government reorganization might improve the situation, Gruenspecht and Portney dismiss that idea as politically unrealistic and excessively disruptive. They focus instead on more modest organizational reforms that would improve interagency coordination and the effectiveness of DOE. The authors would reorganize the department's own programs, move some programs currently located elsewhere into DOE, and require policy and regulatory shops in different cabinet departments to assess how their proposed actions would affect energy and environmental goals. Gruenspecht and Portney believe that such organizational changes, although comparatively modest, would improve the policymaking process.

America's Security and Global Role

Americans felt relieved and triumphant at the end of the cold war. But the euphoria ceased on September 11, 2001. The United States is now engaged in another war, confronting the twin threats of tyrannical states and stateless terrorists, plus a host of other destabilizing global forces.

Foreign Policy

Charting a wise course for U.S. foreign policy in the twenty-first century must begin with a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the modern world. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay explain in chapter 9 that America has entered a new age of global politics. This new age has two defining and often conflicting features. One is America's dominance. Without U.S. leadership or active participation, many, perhaps most, international endeavors—from trade liberalization to suppressing local aggression—are likely to falter. The other distinctive feature is globalization. The increasingly close linkage of all parts of the world has unleashed economic, political, and social forces beyond the capacity of any one country, including the United States, to control.

Daalder and Lindsay note that the foreign policy debate in the United States does not turn on whether the United States should be actively engaged abroad. Most Americans, regardless of their political affiliation, recognize that U.S. well-being is enhanced by the spread of economic freedom and political democracy—and that America has a large role to play in furthering these ends. Instead, the foreign policy debate is over the means. And that in turn is primarily a debate over the relative importance of the two defining features of global politics.

One viewpoint, which Daalder and Lindsay label *Hegemonist*, sees the primacy of military and economic power as the key to securing U.S. interests. Hegemonists believe the United States should unabashedly exercise its power to protect or promote those interests. Hegemonists see formal international arrangements as complicating rather than enabling this effort. Another view, which Daalder and Lindsay label *Globalist*, contends that globalization both expands the list of foreign policy problems and limits the effectiveness of American power to deal with them unilaterally. Globalists reject the unilateralism of Hegemonists and emphasize working through international institutions and adherence to international law. This conflict was transparent in the dispute within the Bush administration and in the larger foreign policy community over whether it was important to secure the approval of the UN Security Council to use force against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. Hegemonists saw such approval as unnecessary. Globalists believed it to be crucial for the legitimacy of any military action.

What both Hegemonists and Globalists miss, Daalder and Lindsay argue, is that any successful foreign policy in the age of global politics must combine elements of both power *and* cooperation. Power helps the United States achieve its goals abroad. Washington must be willing to assert its primacy in defense of core interests, even if it sometimes angers friends and allies. Yet a policy based on indiscriminate muscle flexing will not work. The U.S. military was fully capable of winning the military war in Iraq without aid from other nations, but winning the subsequent peace will require broad international involvement. The solution of this and other problems requires mutual cooperation, which will become increasingly difficult to secure if other countries perceive Washington as indifferent to their interests. Preventing such perceptions from spreading requires America to use its power in concert with friends and allies, to strive to increase the efficacy of international rules and institutions, to forge new structures of cooperation to deal with emerging difficulties and opportunities, and to ensure that agreed rules and norms are effectively enforced.

Foreign Economic Policy

America's prosperity is inextricably tied to that of other nations. This reality, as Lael Brainard and Robert Litan stress in chapter 10, creates for the United States an interest in improving the economic prospects of poorer countries, in expanding trade, and in reforming the rules that regulate the flows of capital across national borders. Brainard and Litan acknowledge that reversing the decades-long decline in U.S. spending on foreign aid will not necessarily buy much relief from terrorist threats, but the authors make a strong case for greater generosity toward poor countries on humanitarian grounds. No amount of aid will help lift countries out of poverty, however, if funds are misused. The return on investment is reasonably dependable in areas such as public health, sanitation, and education. Tossing money at projects with a glamorous profile—dams, highways, and factories—is too often wasteful.

Furthermore, no amount of foreign aid, no matter how skillfully distributed, can do as much for poor countries as could a U.S. willingness to open world markets to their exports. Nevertheless, continued liberalization of multilateral trade is a contentious issue everywhere, as attested by the shaky start to the current round of multilateral trade talks organized under the banner of the World Trade Organization. Given the friction among major trading partners, the United States often has turned toward bilateral deals in which U.S. negotiators can maximize their leverage. Brainard and Litan warn that Washington should mostly resist this temptation. Bilateral accords may divert trade from third parties, reduce international specialization, and retard rather than encourage global economic growth. The United States would be wiser to make broad multilateral agreements its top priority and take steps to reduce trade barriers in sectors such as agriculture, services, and labor-intensive manufactures that traditionally have been shielded from foreign competition.

A smoothly functioning international trading regime also requires stable financial markets. International financial crises have repeatedly rattled world markets in recent years. The pattern is familiar. A nation borrows heavily abroad. It accumulates an unsustainable debt. Its currency collapses. Severe economic disruption ensues. Globalization has increased the risk that such crises will damage the global financial system. The United States and other rich nations have responded to these crises by insisting that troubled countries curb their unsound practices and offering assistance if they do. Brainard and Litan propose that these policies be supplemented

by enlisting the cooperation of private investors in efforts to avert emergencies. The authors also warn that America's large and persistent trade deficits are coming to threaten international economic stability. Correcting the U.S. trade imbalance will probably require a considerable decline in the value of the dollar relative to other major currencies. If that adjustment is not managed well, widespread global economic dislocations could ensue.

Defense

Does the United States have the right defense orientation and force structure at this critical stage in history? In the main it does, concludes Michael O'Hanlon in chapter 11. American military power dwarfs that of its nearest competitors. Some other militaries are larger, but none can match U.S. forces in technology, equipment, and training. U.S. military supremacy serves not only American interests, O'Hanlon argues, but also those of most other countries. The U.S. military provides the glue that holds alliances together and the stability necessary for the world's major economies to flourish. No other country or coalition of countries is prepared to share much of this burden. Proposals to reduce U.S. defense capabilities substantially may seem attractive in a time of growing federal budget deficits. However, O'Hanlon argues, they would do more harm than good. Instead, prudence calls for modest increases in defense spending. Equipment bought during the 1980s needs to be replaced or refurbished, and the war against terrorism, among other contingencies, is placing greater demands on the military.

While some additional U.S. defense spending is justified, O'Hanlon argues that large increases are not. The United States spent roughly \$350 billion on defense in 2002. The Bush administration projects increasing that amount until real defense spending reaches about \$500 billion in 2009. O'Hanlon maintains that spending of such magnitude is unnecessary. In his view, it is possible to hold the line on defense spending at roughly \$400 billion a year in real terms, excluding the immediate costs of the Iraq war and the costs of stabilization operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

O'Hanlon offers several suggestions for how the Bush administration could moderate its proposed boost in defense spending. One is to further exploit technological advances in electronics, sensors, and munitions to modernize existing systems. That approach allows for economical and effective innovations—as seen in the war in Afghanistan, where aging B-52 bombers dropped smart bombs that were guided to their targets by state-of-the-art targeting and communications systems in the hands of soldiers on

the ground. Second, the Bush administration should be more selective in acquiring new generations of weapons systems. O'Hanlon criticizes the Bush administration for relying too heavily on replacing major combat systems with new ones that are unnecessarily costly. A third suggestion has to do with military compensation, which has never been higher in inflation-adjusted dollars than it is today. That means that in most instances the growth rate in military compensation does not need to be much higher than the inflation rate. Finally, O'Hanlon recommends that the growth of spending on operations and maintenance be reduced by, among other things, closing unneeded military bases and reforming military health-care services.

None of these changes would dramatically change U.S. defense policy. However, in O'Hanlon's view, the decisive victory of American-led forces in the Iraq war demonstrates that radical changes in the size or composition of the U.S. military are unnecessary. The fact that U.S. troops were highly trained and well equipped enabled them to oust Saddam Hussein from power in less than a month and with fewer allied casualties than were incurred during the Persian Gulf war. What is needed in place of a major restructuring is prudent action to reduce defense costs. Smart cost-cutting in the defense budget has considerable virtue given the huge fiscal deficits looming in the years ahead.

Terrorism

September 11 introduced Americans to what Steven Simon in chapter 12 calls the "new" terrorism. Secular concerns motivated "old" terrorist groups, such as the Irish Republican Army and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In contrast, religious zealotry drives members of al Qaeda and other similar groups. They see apocalyptic conflict with nonbelievers as a route to redemption. Al Qaeda's extreme and violent militancy draws on a messianic strand in Islamic thinking that dates back nearly a millennium but that is not shared by most Muslims. This dimension is what makes al Qaeda more dangerous than most other terrorist organizations.

Attempts to blunt al Qaeda's appeal by addressing supposed "root causes" such as economic stagnation, illiteracy, and political repression may be desirable, Simon argues, but they are unlikely to help much in the near term. The United States, for now, should concentrate on reducing its vulnerability to terrorism through actions. These actions combine offensive strategies abroad and defensive ones at home. We need improved

intelligence and covert capabilities. We also need to improve our law enforcement capabilities, prevent terrorists from obtaining weapons of mass destruction, better protect high-value targets, and increase the capacity to mitigate the effects of terrorist attacks when they do occur. Technology offers some promise for making this tall order easier to accomplish.

Simon observes, however, that the United States will also need to pursue broader strategies for dealing with the new terrorism. Cooperation with other countries is and will remain essential to tracking and disrupting terrorist operations: it may even be necessary to sacrifice some U.S. interests to help preserve that cooperation. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process should be revived and gradual democratization encouraged in the Arab world. Pushing for rapid political change in the Arab world would be unwise, in Simon's view, but so too is indefinite support of prowestern autocrats.

Security and Civil Liberties

Among the troubling questions raised by the catastrophic terrorist attacks launched against the United States is this: Do some of the traditional personal freedoms that Americans enjoy conflict with the measures to promote domestic security? In chapter 13 Stuart Taylor grapples with this dilemma. He suggests that the pre-September 11 balance between civil liberties and personal security warrants considerable revision. The American people now have legitimate reason to grant government expanded investigative powers. Critics often exaggerate the dangers that such powers pose to our core freedoms. Security, after all, is a *precondition* for liberty.

Taylor suggests that investigative powers ought to be extended to include additional electronic surveillance, aggressive interrogation (but not torture), and even preventive detention under well-defined circumstances. He also doubts that law enforcement authorities can entirely forgo some forms of "profiling" if, for example, the screening of airline passengers is to be effective.

Taylor acknowledges that the steps he is proposing require safeguards to minimize abuse. He deplores the continued detention of hundreds of foreign-born residents arrested in the United States since September 11 on suspicion of having ties to al Qaeda. To limit the government's misuse of its new security powers, he recommends that Congress write legislation carefully spelling out allowable procedures. Taylor emphasizes that even if all the changes he outlines were adopted, Americans would continue to enjoy more civil liberties than are available to the people of almost any other nation.

Politics and Governance

The contributors to this book put forward an extensive set of tasks for the government to perform in coming years. Will our political institutions rise to the occasion? The authors of the last two chapters ponder this question.

Toward Political Sobriety

In chapter 14, Pietro Nivola finds that an introspective public mood following America's triumph in the cold war, intensified party competition, and the news media's emphasis on petty or parochial subjects contributed to a trivialization of the nation's political dialogue over the past decade. Palace intrigue, arcane legal inquests, and bitter disputes over mundane domestic matters became routine. Civility in public life became a casualty. The federal government increasingly became immersed in quotidian matters that typically occupy local authorities. Partisan wrangling, frequently over questions of symbolic rather than substantive significance, became more pronounced. The result was a distracted and overextended government—one that, Nivola contends, devoted something less than adequate attention to the nation's highest priorities, including the security of its citizens.

Today Nivola sees heartening signs that the nation is moving away from "small matters" and reengaging "great causes," as President George W. Bush remarked in his January 2002 State of the Union address. The continuing aftershock of September 11, 2001, and Saddam Hussein's dangerous defiance of United Nations resolutions over the past dozen years led the United States to insist on Iraq's disarmament. How the U.S. government will contend simultaneously with the latest lethal threat from North Korea is less clear as this book goes to press. More generally, the durability of whatever transformation has occurred in American politics remains to be tested. Certainly, the merits of more tax cuts even as projected deficits soar, terrorist activity persists, and military commitments proliferate are debatable.

Further corrections in the U.S. political process may be desirable to fortify the capacity of the federal government to meet the responsibilities this nation must confront over the long haul. The correctives, Nivola writes, probably have to include additional adjustments in the party system and the nature of electoral campaigns, the uses of opinion polling, the process of recruitment for the public service, and, perhaps most important, the division of labor between national and local levels of government. In the absence of such improvements, Nivola worries that the United States gradually might lapse back into what he calls "low politics"—where the

energies of national policymakers are diverted to narrow expediencies, new rounds of partisan squabbling, and ventures not befitting a serious central government.

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Alone among the authors in this volume, James Q. Wilson also contributed to the first edition of *Agenda for the Nation*. In chapter 15, he surveys developments over the intervening thirty-five years. He notes that much has changed and, in his view, not always for the better. The federal government has delved into so many of society's supposed "problems" that arguably its agenda now is overloaded. The rise of divided government and growing distrust between Democrats and Republicans have polarized Congress, hindered efforts to reach sensible compromises, and often produced an excess of detailed, prescriptive legislation. Federal courts have taken on an increasingly prominent policymaking role, deciding issues once left to the political branches and sometimes assuming effective control of local-government agencies. Voters show less confidence in government officials, in part because the officials appear to dissipate resources on countless secondary undertakings rather than focusing effectively on society's central needs.

Despite this unsettling assessment, Wilson regards the American political system as generally resilient. The problem is not, as some would have it, that we are saddled with an eighteenth century constitution ill-suited to the demands of the twenty-first century. Through the history of the republic, our government has usually managed to act decisively in times of major crisis. Wilson—and the editors of this book—are cautiously optimistic that now will be no exception.

No book, even one presumptuous enough to propose an agenda for the nation, can speak to every important issue government must address. Many readers no doubt would add to our list of priorities, though we think few would casually subtract from it. Many readers no doubt also would disagree with the arguments some of our contributors make in the following essays. Indeed, not all of the views expressed here are congenial even to all of this volume's editors. Our hope, nonetheless, is that the essays in this book will help inform debates on how the United States government can effectively serve its citizens and meet its global responsibilities.

