

WHAT SHOULD BE AMERICA'S TOP 5 PRIORITIES

Success and survival in the 21st Century will require that we address a myriad of important issues. And while Guns, Race, Gender, Global Warming and Immigration are all important issues. They don't even make the Top 10 list.

My Top 5 are as follows:

1. Artificial Intelligence

In 2014, Stephen Hawking said that success in creating AI would be “the biggest event in human history.” Hawking believed that in the coming decades, AI could offer “incalculable benefits and risks.” Ray Kurzweil, the head of AI for Google, says that AI will eclipse human intelligence by 2029. Kurzweil predicts that by the 2040s, AI will be a billion times more capable than human intelligence. We lack the intellectual capacity to even comprehend what this could mean to humanity, but one thing is clear, this represents a technological tsunami on the immediate horizon.

2. Technology and Employment

In January 2016, the World Economic Forum issued a report titled *The Future of Jobs*, which says, “The Fourth Industrial Revolution, which includes developments in previously disjointed fields such as artificial intelligence and machine-learning, robotics, nanotechnology, 3-D printing, genetics and biotechnology, will cause widespread disruption not only to business models but also to labor markets over *the next five years*, with enormous change predicted in the skill sets needed to thrive in the new landscape.” Millions of jobs will be lost to automation over the next ten years. Instead of worrying about immigrants taking our jobs, we should be worried about machines taking our jobs.

3. Economic Inequality

The disruption, that we are certain to experience, will impact a public that is already economically insecure. America has historically experienced rising wages, it was the foundation of the middle class. For millions of Americans, life got better with each year as the value of their wages increased and our economy grew. This is no longer happening. The middle class is disappearing. For most Americans, real wages have been stagnant or falling for decades. We now have the highest-ever percentage of people on food stamps— double the historical rate. From 1973 to 2016, net productivity rose 73.7 percent while hourly wages essentially stagnated—increasing only 12.5 percent over forty-three years. Economic insecurity creates social and political instability. And this instability can be agitated and exploited by hostile actors using social media to weaponize misinformation.

4. Misinformation and Critical Thinking

Social media is the first wave of the technological revolution. There are over 2 billion people on Facebook alone, and social media platforms like Facebook, are already being used to shape public opinion. We need to understand that the human brain is extremely malleable and susceptible to manipulation. Moreover, our knowledge of the brain, and the technology available for manipulation, has increased exponentially over the last decade. Success and survival in the 21st century will require an ability to acquire, analyze and integrate diverse sources of information, while guarding against misinformation. It will require critical thinking. And critical thinking is in decline. As Justice Souter warned, "our republican government isn't threatened by foreign invasion or a military coup, but by civic ignorance". This is especially true when misinformation is weaponized, and intentionally deployed in highly targeted, disinformation campaigns.

5. Political Corruption, Division and Dysfunction

James Wolfensohn, the former chairman of the World Bank, warned in his farewell speech to the bank two decades ago that the problem that disturbed him the most when contemplating the future of the world economy was corruption. Studies have shown that we are now more polarized as a nation, than at any time since the civil war. America is now divided into two groups, Republicans and Democrats. In 1961,

James Stoner released a groundbreaking study which showed that groups actually make more polarized decisions than individuals do.

In the early 1970s, Yale University psychologist Irving Janis found that certain conditions can lead to a particularly extreme form of polarization called “groupthink” during which an illusion of consensus takes over. Factors that lead to groupthink include members being close-knit and like-minded, a group leader who makes his or her position known and the group being shut off from other influences and opinions. These conditions exist today. At a time when we should be planning and preparing, we are instead divided by race, age, sex, religion, economics and identity politics. And we are paralyzed by political corruption, division and dysfunction. The institutions that should be acting as our first line of defense, our elected representatives, are instead contributing to our division and decline. While the institutions that should be acting as our last line of defense, a free and robust press, are instead engaged in a search for ratings, which is fueling, rather than reducing our polarization.

In my view, these are the “Top 5” issues that we should be discussing and debating in 2020. All other issues, especially all identity politics issues, run a distant second.

What is perhaps most alarming about the technological tsunami, and its attendant consequences, is the speed at which change will take place, and our general unpreparedness. When discussing AI, Bill Gates said, “I don’t know why more people aren’t talking about it.” We should be talking about it - now rather than later.