

The Ledger

Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Economic Education Newsletter

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***DO WE REALLY
WANT GOVERNMENT
OFF OUR BACKS?***

The Ledger

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Introduction

Do we really want government off our backs?

The call to “get government off our backs” grew louder during the late 20th century and soon rose to a full-throated roar. The prevailing belief seemed to be that private industry and “the markets” were better able to deliver just about anything citizens might want or need, if only government would get out of the way.

“Government is not the solution to our problem,” President Reagan told us in 1981, “government is the problem.” Fifteen years later, President Clinton declared “The era of big government is over.” And in 2001, antitax activist Grover Norquist insisted that he didn’t want to abolish government but simply “reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

Surprising? Not really. America, after all, was founded by people wary of concentrated government power. To this day, we pride ourselves on our self-reliance and rugged individualism. Ours is a country where we “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.”

But what would our economy be like—what would our lives be like—without government involvement? Do we really want government off our backs? We examine these questions in this issue of *The Ledger*.

“You can have a market economy, but not a market society.”

Ricardo Lagos
Former President
of Chile

We’re not out to convince you that more government is better government, nor are we saying that government should be the default for addressing the challenges we all face. But in this day and age, when so many people seem to have lost faith in government’s ability to do anything of value, we figured the time was right to look back at some of the positive contributions government has made to the lives of so many Americans.

One last thing: The government programs and initiatives we’ve chosen to highlight do not represent a complete list, and you may not agree that those we’ve selected have had a positive impact. In either case we’d enjoy hearing your thoughts. Because as Thoreau wrote in *Civil Disobedience*, “Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.”

"EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS IS NOBODY'S BUSINESS."



Boston Light
Image: Boston Public Library

Boston Light has guided ships safely into port since 1716. It is a long-standing example of government providing an essential public service that private companies might be unwilling or unable to provide.

When the British blew it up on their way out of town in 1776, the Massachusetts legislature appropriated funds for a new structure (1783), and shortly thereafter, Massachusetts turned control over to the U.S. government. Federal tax dollars have kept it operating ever since (except for the years during World War II).

Economist Paul Samuelson may or may not have had Boston Light in mind when he cited lighthouses as a “typical example of government service. These save lives and cargoes; but lighthouse keepers cannot reach out to collect fees from ships. So we have here a divergence between private and social advantage.”

Samuelson went on to note that “government provides certain indispensable public services without which community life would be unthinkable and which by their nature cannot appropriately be left to private enterprises.” Think national defense, public safety, and the judicial system.

But over the years, our sense of what constitutes essential public services has expanded, and that has created varying degrees of political and social tension. To what extent is government responsible for providing services? Can we afford to provide the level of services people seem to want? What services do they actually want? And what are the limits of government’s regulatory authority over industry, commerce, finance, and personal behavior?

That tension arises because government action or government involvement introduces a level of coercion, often in the form of taxation and increased regulation. Samuelson makes that point in the following passage (which is worth reading for the nostalgia value alone):

“It is true that that the citizenry as a whole imposes the tax burden upon itself; also, each citizen is sharing in the collective benefits of government. But there is not the same close connection between benefits and tax payments as holds when the individual citizen puts a dime into a gum machine or makes an ordinary purchase. I need not smoke Winstons or buy nylon carpeting or choose fried eggs, but I must pay



my share of the taxes used to finance the various activities of government.

Moreover, a second form of coercion is involved in the universal custom of passing governmental laws: thou shalt not sell false weight, thou shalt not employ child labor, thou shalt not burn houses, thou shalt not pour out smoke from thy factory chimney, thou shalt not sell or smoke opium, thou shalt not charge more than the ceiling price for food, and so forth. This set of rules gives the framework within which private enterprise functions; it also modifies the direction of that functioning. Together with government expenditure and taxation, the commands of government supplement the price system in determining the economic fate of the nation.

It would be fruitless to debate whether public enterprise or private enterprise is the more important—as fruitless as to debate heredity versus environment. Without either, our economic world would be an entirely different one.”

Those words were written a lifetime ago. Times have changed, and so have attitudes toward government. Today, even using the words “public” and “enterprise” in the same breath invites controversy. But the fact remains that “our economic world would be an entirely different one” without government involvement. Whether it would be different-and-better or different-and-worse is yet another source of tension and controversy.



The Green Economy

Village

Government regulation and involvement in the economy didn't begin with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Early New England towns set aside land for common use, and town selectmen closely controlled who could use it and how. The Boston Common is among the best surviving examples, but dozens of picture postcard village greens throughout New England also serve as reminders of colonial-era government planning.

Bonner Map of Boston, 1722

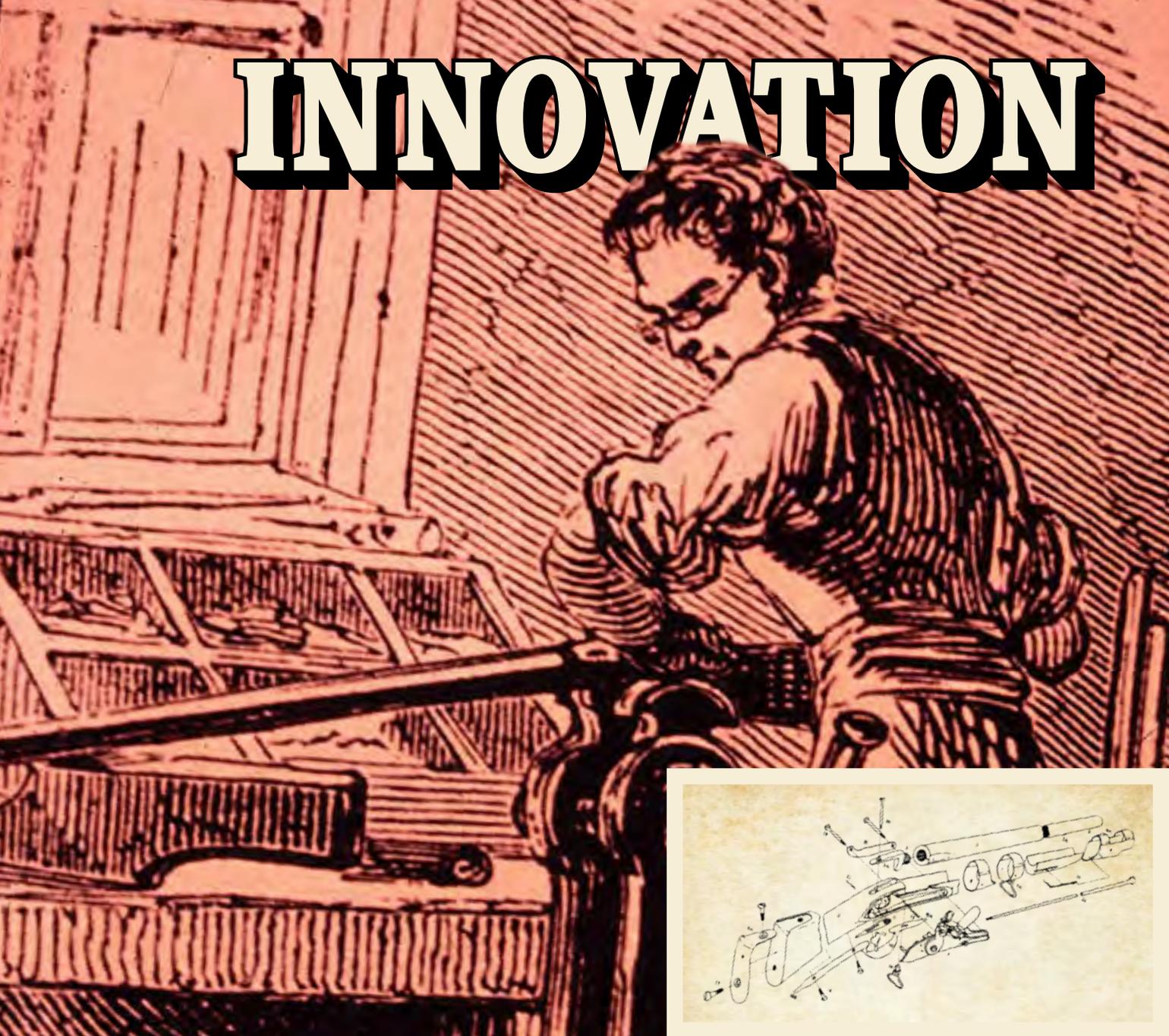
Image: Mapping Boston/Boston Public Library



Grafton Common, Grafton, MA

Image: John Phelan, National Register of Historic Places/from Wikimedia.org

INNOVATION



“Innovation” isn’t a word that 21st century Americans ordinarily associate with government. But since the earliest days of the Republic, the U.S. government has been a catalyst for technological advances.

In 1815, when Congress established national armories in Springfield (MA) and Harpers Ferry (VA), its primary purpose was to promote production of military firearms with standardized, interchangeable parts. But the infusion of government money

INNOVATION

had a much broader impact, particularly in the area surrounding the Springfield Armory, where skilled gunsmiths, mechanics, and machinists exchanged ideas and sometimes established factories and machine shops of their own, using the techniques they perfected while working at the armory.

“By the 1850s,” write the authors of *Inventing America*, “armory methods could be found in factories making sewing machines, pocket watches, padlocks, railway equipment, shoes, wagons, and hand tools. And the key transmitters of these methods were New England machine-tool firms closely connected with the Springfield Armory.”

And not to belabor the point, but it was a government initiative that set everything in motion.

“All well and good,” you say, “but has the government done anything to spur innovation in more modern times?”

The short answer is yes. (Think “rocket science.”)

In 1961, President John Kennedy committed America to putting a man on the moon by the end of the decade. NASA—the National Aeronautics and Space Administration—got the job done with a few months to spare. In July of 1969, astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin walked on the moon’s surface, thanks to a government-funded, government-managed program.

Still not convinced? There’s more. (This time, think “cyberspace.”)



Buzz Aldrin on the Moon, 1969
Image: NASA

Water Celebration on Boston Common, 1848
Image: Boston Public Library



INFRASTRUCTURE

“... in 1848, 300,000 people from all over New England gathered on Boston Common. They came to celebrate the completion of the city’s first municipal water system. With the construction of an aqueduct that brought fresh water 15 miles from Lake Cochituate in Natick to Boston, the city for the first time had a pure supply of water for drinking, bathing, cooking and cleaning.”

Excerpt from [“October 25, 1848: Boston Celebrates Opening of Aqueduct”](#)

City Dwellers:

Turn on your faucet, and clean water comes out. Flush your toilet, and the opposite of clean water goes away. It may not be magic, but few things have had a greater beneficial effect on public health and modern urban life.

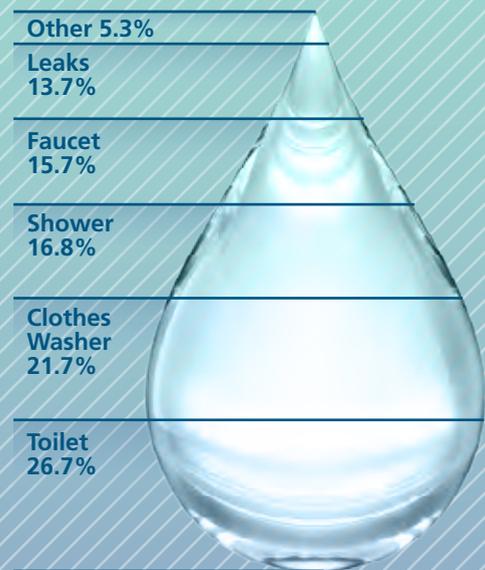
In the vast majority of U.S. cities clean water and effective sewage disposal are provided by public entities. You pay for those services, of course, but on balance they are worth (almost) every penny.

Even if you're one of those people who buys bottled water because you don't trust what comes out of the tap, you probably use municipal water for bathing, doing laundry, and general washing up. If so, consider this fact from Stanley Lebergott's book *Pursuing Happiness*: In the days before running water, housewives (because it was almost always women who got stuck doing this) had to haul 10,000 gallons a year into the kitchen, laundry, or bath.

Ten thousand gallons a year averages out to 27 gallons a day. Not much by modern standards, but it's still a lot to carry. Anyone who's ever bought gallon-jugs of bottled water at the grocery store, knows what it's like to lug one or two from the car to the kitchen. Imagine carrying 27 of them up two or three flights of stairs ... every day ... for your entire life.

Now consider this: Indoor water use currently averages around 75-80 gallons of water per person, per day.

How Much Water Do We Use?



Source: American Water Works Association Research Foundation, "Residential End Uses of Water." 1999

That's in the neighborhood of 300 gallons per day for a household of four.

Think about that for a minute. Without the infrastructure and maintenance that municipal water agencies provide—and we all pay for—we'd be spending a lot more time toting water into our homes. We'd also be taking a lot fewer showers and washing our clothes far less often.

The only people who might be happy with that are the makers of Febreze® and underarm deodorant.

Country Folks and Denizens of Deep Suburbia:

You might have your own private water wells and septic systems, but what about electricity?

By the 1930s, most American cities were wired for electricity, but 90 percent of America's farms were without power. Private utilities had little incentive to run high-cost lines to isolated homesteads. (For a more modern parallel, think "broadband internet service.")

Things only began to change when the U.S. government created the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) in 1935. Thanks to the REA, almost every farm had electricity by the 1950s.



Image: Library of Congress

Getting From Point A to Point B

Fact: A ton of goods could be brought 3000 miles from Europe to America for about nine dollars, and for the same sum it could be moved only 30 miles overland in this country. (Excerpt from a U.S. Senate Committee Report issued in 1816).

Fact: In 1812, a freight wagon drawn by four horses took 75 days to travel from Worcester, MA to Charleston, S.C. (Source: *The Transportation Revolution*, George Rogers Taylor).

Fact: In the 1840s, the voyage from Boston to San Francisco took 150 to 200 days aboard a conventional sailing ship or 110 days by clipper ship. Today, commercial jets make the trip in under five hours. (Source: *The Transportation Revolution*, George Rogers Taylor).

In preindustrial times, travel was slow, costly, uncomfortable and dangerous. People often spent their entire lives within a few miles of where they were born. There was no easy way to get from Point A



Joining the Tracks for the First Transcontinental Railway, Promontory Point, Utah, 1869
Image: National Archives



to Point B, and even a simple shopping excursion to a market town ten miles away could turn into a daylong odyssey.

The convergence of private enterprise and government involvement helped to change all that. Two huge undertakings, separated by almost a century, serve as examples.

One was the completion of America's first transcontinental railroad in 1869. The ceremonial driving of the last spike at Promontory Point, Utah, marked the completion of a project that was an engineering marvel and a testament to human perseverance. The financiers and the laborers who laid the tracks were the ones who took the project from dream to reality, but they had considerable help from the U.S. Congress. [The Pacific Railroad Act of 1862](#) provided two key elements: 1) millions of acres of public land to serve as rights of way for the rail lines, and 2) financial backing in the form of 30-year government bonds.

Nearly 100 years later, Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which funded most of the [Interstate Highway System](#): \$25 billion to construct 41,000 miles of modern, limited-access highway. Without federal involvement and funding, the Interstates might never have been built.



Interstate Highway System, 1976
Image: Library of Congress

Education



School Days, Boston, Circa 1900
Image: Boston Public Library

We've been hearing it for years: "The schools in (fill in the name of another country) are much better than ours."

In the late 1950s, after the launch of Sputnik, schools in the Soviet Union were said to be better than ours. In the 1980s, the Japanese economy was ascendant, and Japanese schools were thought to be better than ours. But today the Soviet Union exists only in history books, and the Japanese economy lost much of its steam in the 1990s, so now China and India are "filling in the blank."



College Students, Iowa State, 1942
Image: Jack Delano, Library of Congress

Time will tell. But universal public education still stands as one of America’s most successful government programs.

America’s public schools have taken their share of criticism, and some of it may be warranted. But given what we expect them to do—meet the needs of students who come from very different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds and often act as caregivers to those students—our public schools do a pretty good job.

Anyone who has attended a public college or university has also benefited from government involvement in education. When Congress passed the [Morrill Act of 1862](#), it gave each state at least 90,000 acres of public land. The states were then free to sell that land and use the funds for:

“the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the State may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

The Morrill Act helped to establish more than 70 “land grant colleges,” some of which are now among the world’s most renowned institutions of higher learning. It also put a college education within the reach of many more students ... and brightened the lives of countless college football fans.

Eighty years later, the [Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944](#)—better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights—opened college campuses to an even broader student population. The G.I. Bill’s generous education benefits provided returning World War II veterans with an opportunity to improve their lives through higher education. As a result, college enrollment increased sharply and campuses expanded to meet the demand. Few measures, public or private, have done as much to reinforce the relationship between education and the prospects for a better life.

Your **MONEY** *and* *Your* **LIFE**



A Run on American Union Bank, New York, 1931
Image: Wikimedia Commons

Helping to Protect Your Money

One thing you almost never saw during the financial crisis that's come to be known as The Great Recession: Lines of panicked depositors hoping to withdraw their money from their banks. In large part, that's because the federal government, through the [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation \(FDIC\)](#), has insured bank deposits since the 1930s. Few measures have done more to shore up confidence in the banking system. Today (2012), [FDIC coverage](#) is \$250,000 for single accounts, joint accounts, and individual retirement accounts.

Also during the “Great Recession” the [Federal Reserve System](#), America’s central bank, helped to stabilize the banking system by acting as “lender of last resort” to financial institutions and providing liquidity to the financial markets. It also worked with the U.S. Treasury Department to coordinate the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and continued to conduct “stress tests” to evaluate whether or not the largest U.S. bank holding companies “continue to meet supervisory expectations for capital adequacy.”

Consumer Protection

There was a time when *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) was the only form of consumer protection. But today there are federal regulations in place that give consumers a measure of protection from unsafe products and unscrupulous dealings.

Improvements in auto safety provide a striking example. Today automakers emphasize safety and point to their “five-star” safety ratings, but that wasn’t always the case. “Safety doesn’t sell” used to be the refrain among auto executives. Then in 1965, a young lawyer named Ralph Nader published *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which detailed the auto industry’s indifference to safety concerns. Congress invited Nader to testify on his findings, and his testimony ultimately led to new safety regulations, safer cars, and fewer highway fatalities.

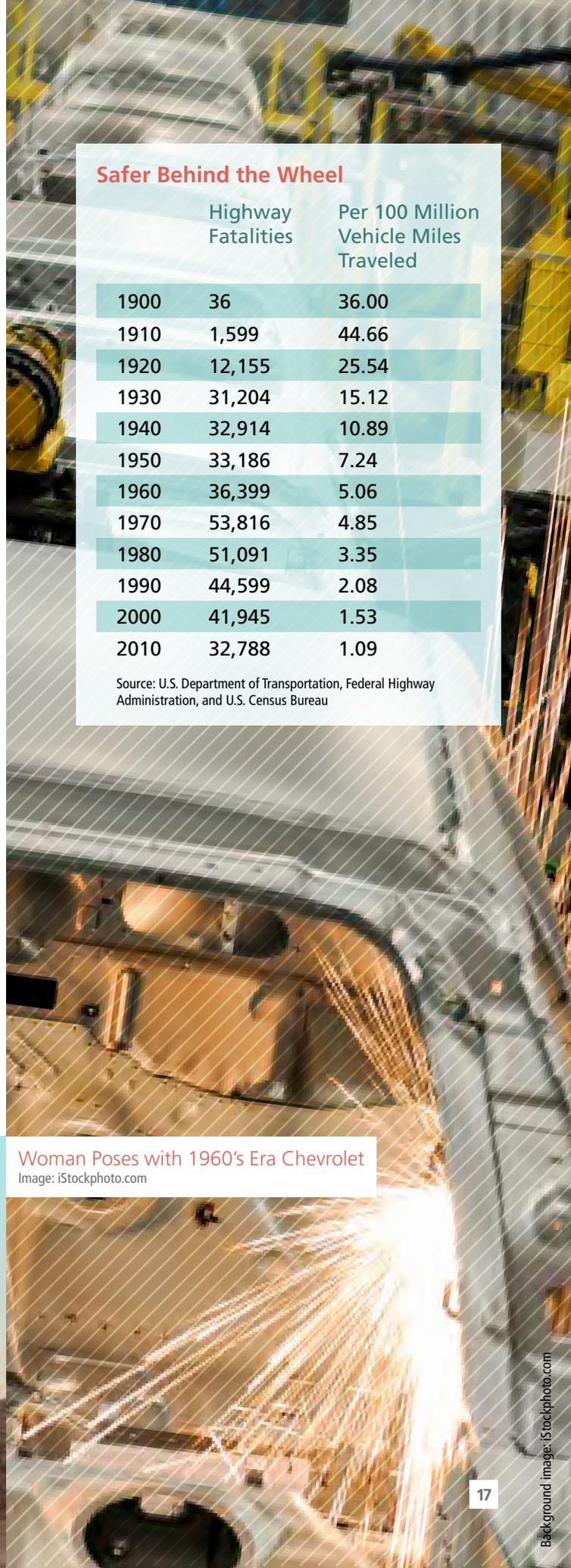
Consumer demand eventually might have prompted automakers to take safety more seriously. But how much longer might it have taken if Nader’s book had not spurred Congress to take action?

Safer Behind the Wheel

	Highway Fatalities	Per 100 Million Vehicle Miles Traveled
1900	36	36.00
1910	1,599	44.66
1920	12,155	25.54
1930	31,204	15.12
1940	32,914	10.89
1950	33,186	7.24
1960	36,399	5.06
1970	53,816	4.85
1980	51,091	3.35
1990	44,599	2.08
2000	41,945	1.53
2010	32,788	1.09

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, and U.S. Census Bureau

Woman Poses with 1960's Era Chevrolet
Image: iStockphoto.com



Safer on the Job

No one worried much about workplace safety when the Industrial Revolution began in the early 1800s. Employers figured it was less expensive to find new workers than to make safety improvements. And that was pretty much the prevailing philosophy for the next 150 years.

One of the things that helped to bring about a change was the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, which created OSHA, the Occupational Safety & Health Administration.

Yes, OSHA regulations can be a pain: Wear your helmet! Wear your goggles! Wear your earplugs! Wear your respirator! Blah! Blah! Blah!

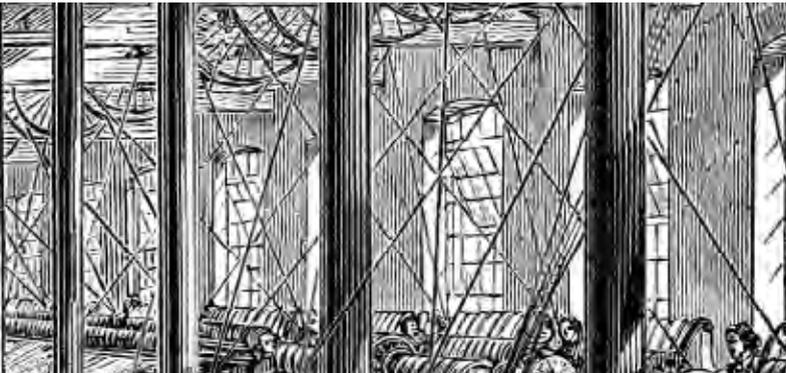
But losing your eyesight, a limb, or a finger can be an even bigger pain. Chronic lung disease is nothing to sneeze at either. And dying on the job can really ruin a person's day.

U.S. Workplace Deaths

(Rate per 100,000 workers)

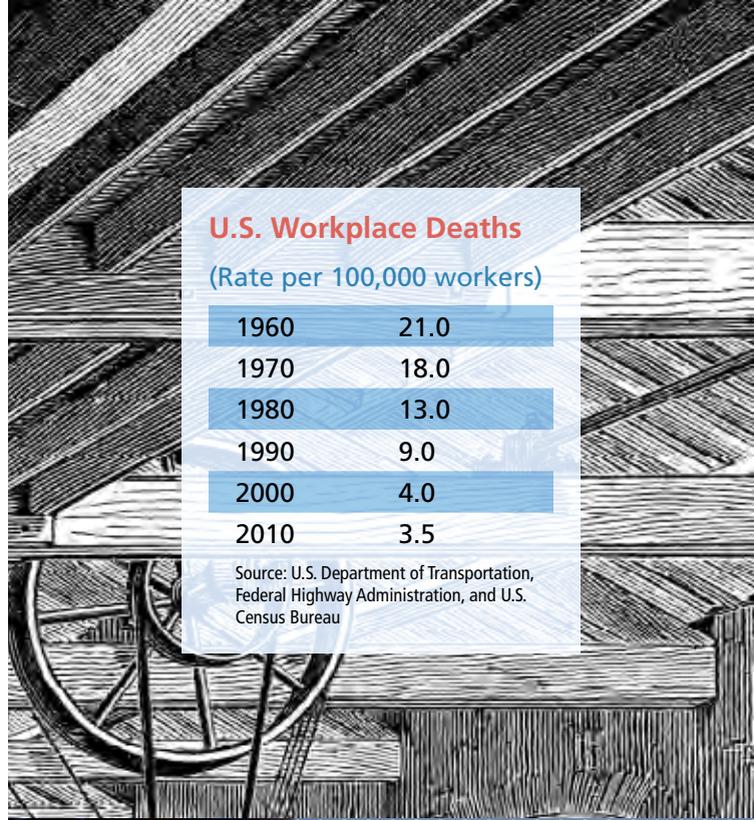
1960	21.0
1970	18.0
1980	13.0
1990	9.0
2000	4.0
2010	3.5

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, and U.S. Census Bureau



Worker Poses with Safety Equipment

Image: iStockphoto.com



Maintaining the Social Safety Net



Americans don't have the same level of cradle-to-grave security available in some European countries, but our social safety net offers us far more protection than our ancestors had from life's uncertainties. Three programs in particular—Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance—are extremely popular, even though we worry about the cost.

Social Security Poster, 1935
Image: Library of Congress



When [President Franklin Roosevelt](#) signed the Social Security Act in 1935 he noted that, “We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age.”

Before Social Security came into being, few Americans had the option of looking forward to retirement. The main alternatives to work were death or disability, and those who were unable to work had to rely completely on the kindness of family members or the benevolence of local politicians and charities. As Roosevelt noted in a 1938 radio address, “Men and women too old and infirm to work either depended on those who had but little to share, or spent their remaining years within the walls of a poorhouse ... The Social Security Act offers to all our citizens a workable and working method of meeting urgent present needs and of forestalling future need.” (An often overlooked fact is that unemployment insurance was also a key element of the Social Security Act.)

The other popular safety net program is Medicare, which covers many of the health-care costs for people who are 65 or older. In fact, Medicare is so popular that some people can't bring themselves to believe that it's a government program. “Keep your government hands off my Medicare!” was a rallying cry often heard during the debate over health-care reform in 2009-2010. (You couldn't make this stuff up.)

PRESERVING *the* COMMON WEALTH



Glacier National Park Poster, Between 1936 and 1939
Image: WPA Federal Arts Project, Library of Congress



Protecting National Treasures

In 2011, Ken Burns and PBS did a six-part series called [The National Parks: America's Best Idea](#). We could argue over whether or not the parks and our national forests are America's absolute-number-one-best-idea, but they would almost certainly make everyone's top-ten list.



It's hard to stand in a national park or national forest without feeling a deep sense of gratitude: Gratitude to The Almighty for creating such wonders, and to the humans who cared enough to preserve them.

Concessionaires and entrepreneurs might have been willing to develop some of our natural treasures on a for-profit basis. But a Yellowstone Inc. would not have belonged to all of us. And who knows what might have happened if a private developer decided that Yosemite or Glacier National Park could be put to a more profitable use?

Working Toward a Cleaner Environment

Over the past half-century, state and federal agencies have adopted standards for smokestack emissions, sewage treatment, automobile emissions, hazardous waste disposal and pesticide use. Meeting these standards costs money, and those costs are reflected in the higher prices we pay for a broad range of things—higher sticker prices on cars, bigger water bills, higher utility rates, and more. But on balance, environmental regulations have helped to improve the quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink.

The environment isn't yet as clean as it could be, but it is a lot better than it was—and far better than it is in places around the globe where regulation is minimal and enforcement is nonexistent.



Wire Mills along the Monongahela River, Donora, PA, 1910
Image Credit: Library of Congress

Public Health + Safety



Philadelphia Firefighters, 1850s
Image: Library of Congress

In the 1800s, police officers only had to be tough and willing to work for low pay. Fire brigades were staffed by volunteers or hired by insurance companies to protect policyholders. Neither arrangement worked very well.

Picture this ...

A house in the middle of a densely-settled city block catches fire. The fire brigade, hired and paid by a fire insurance company, pulls up to the burning house and checks for a medallion that indicates whether or not the owners have insurance coverage. Unfortunately, the house isn't covered, so the private fire brigade lets it burn. Worse still, the fire jumps to houses on the same block—some of which are covered by insurance—but the firefighters don't have the resources to battle the multiple blazes.

That happened all too often in the days before municipal fire departments.

Today, government provides police and fire services by using tax dollars to pay trained professionals and purchase the necessary equipment. These services are expensive, but when the worst happens, they prove their worth.

And while we are on the subject of essential services, let's not overlook the value of municipal trash management. Anyone who has ever been to a country where it is a low priority can attest to the impact efficient trash management has on public health and the overall quality of life.



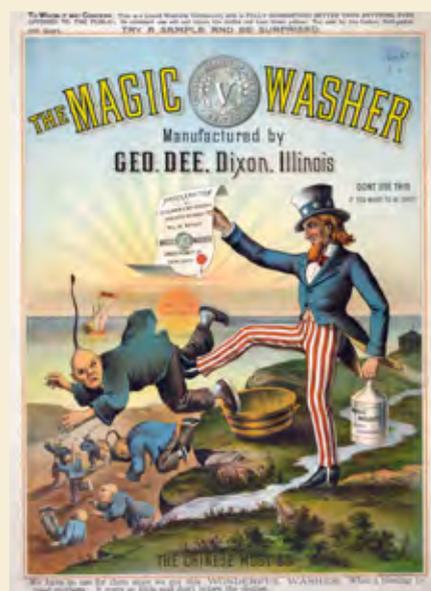
Advertisement for Republic Fire Insurance, Co., mid-1800s
Image: Library of Congress



Trash-strewn yard, early 1900s
Image: Library of Congress

Equal Access: More Seats at the Table

Blatant Ethnic Prejudice Used in Advertising, 1886
Image: Library of Congress



Not so long ago, a commentator on one of the Sunday morning news shows suggested there ought to be “a museum of the 1950s,” and it should be a lot like his old neighborhood in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C. It was a sweet story delivered by someone who obviously had a wonderful childhood in a lovely neighborhood.

Sounds harmless enough, but let’s think this one through before we get too nostalgic for old Chevys, sock hops, and drive-ins.

The Pittsburgh Crawfords, Negro National League Champions, 1935
Image: National Baseball Hall of Fame Library



Pittsburgh Crawfords National League Champions 1935

Segregated Bus Station, Durham, NC, 1940
Image: Library of Congress

The “good old days” weren’t that good for everyone. Black Americans were denied the full rights of citizenship. Ethnic prejudice and anti-Semitism were common and widely accepted. Women routinely experienced discrimination at work and in the courts. Gay and lesbian Americans were subject to arrest. Persons with disabilities had to depend on the whims of others.

True, we are still a long way from utopia, but as a society we’ve made significant progress toward addressing injustice and inequality. Much of that progress has come as a result of government action:

1948: President Harry Truman issues Executive Order 9981 to end segregation in the armed forces.

1954: A U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declares segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

1956: U.S. Supreme Court upholds a lower court ruling that segregation on public buses in Montgomery, Alabama is unconstitutional.

1964: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires equal access to public places, facilities, and accommodations, and outlaws discrimination in employment.

1964/1965: Legislation ends immigration quotas based on race, national origin, and ancestry.

1965: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlaws discriminatory practices that prevented citizens from exercising their constitutional right to vote.

1972: Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972 provides that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

1990: The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities.

2003/2004: A ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court clears the way for Massachusetts to become the first state to allow same-sex marriage.

2010/2011: President Barack Obama signs the Don't Ask Don't Tell Repeal Act which leads to ending the ban on openly gay people serving in the U.S. armed forces.



Wheelchair Racers, Boston Marathon
Image: Wikimedia Commons

Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots
Image: Wikimedia Commons





***“WHEN THE PEOPLE
LEAD, THE LEADERS
WILL FOLLOW.”***

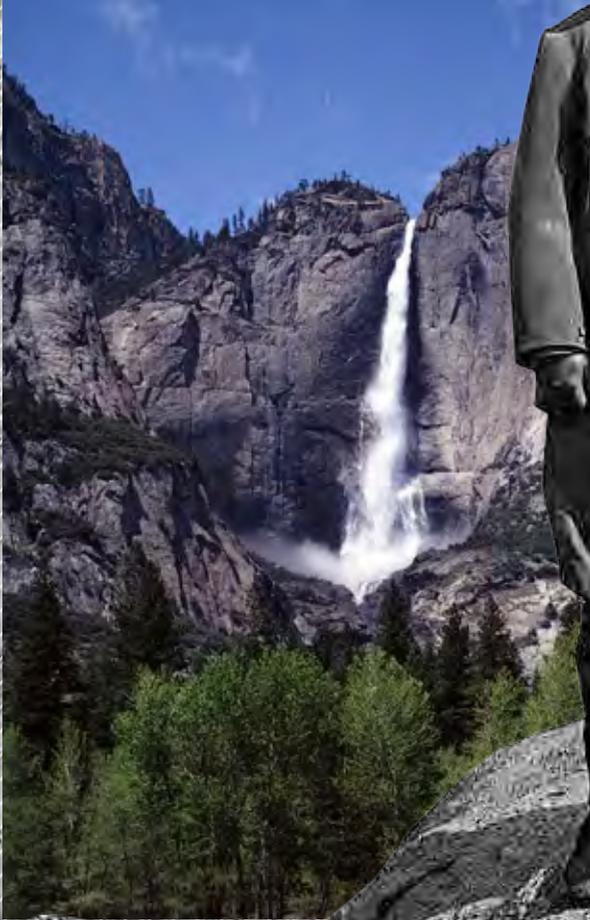
So, there you have it: Some—but certainly not all—of the ways in which government can have a positive impact on citizens’ lives.

But government doesn’t necessarily come up with the energy and ideas that lead to those positive impacts. That’s where citizens come in.

Often, those positive impacts begin with an individual—or group of individuals—whose energy, eloquence, and persistence capture the imagination of the public and the attention of elected officials.

A few examples ...

Yosemite Falls, Yosemite National Park, California
Image: Library of Congress



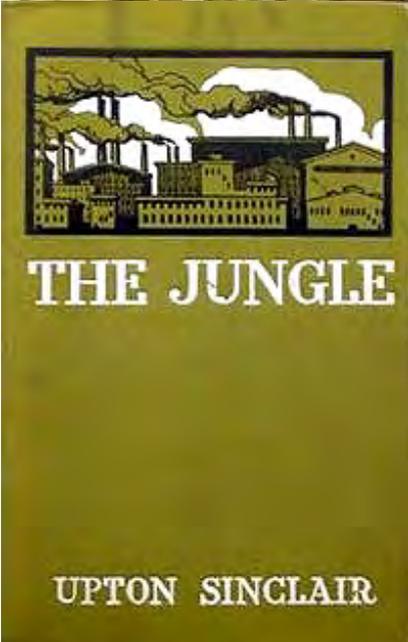
[John Muir](#) loved the Yosemite Valley as much as any human being has ever loved a place. In his quest to protect it and preserve it as a national park, Muir invited [President Theodore Roosevelt](#) on a three-day camping trip to Yosemite. During those three days, Yosemite, with Muir's help, worked its magic on TR, who ultimately supported the inclusion of Yosemite Valley in the Yosemite National Park.



Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, Yosemite Valley, 1903
Image: Library of Congress



Chicago Meatpacking Plant, 1906
Image: Library of Congress



The Jungle, First Edition, 1906
Image: Wikimedia Commons

[Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*](#), spurred President Theodore Roosevelt to throw his full support behind passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906). More than a century later, the novel's description of conditions in Chicago's meatpacking plants still has the power to jolt readers.

March on Washington, 1963

Image Credit: National Archives



[Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) was the face of the historic 1963 civil rights March on Washington, but one of its principal organizers was [A. Phillip Randolph](#). And in 1947, a year before [President Harry Truman ended segregation in the U.S. armed forces](#), Mr. Randolph organized the “Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training.”

A. Philip Randolph

Image Credit: Library of Congress





Rachel Carson
Image: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The first Earth Day—April 22, 1970—drew huge, exuberant crowds and was a big success, thanks in large part to the efforts of [Senator Gaylord Nelson](#), who had called for a nationwide environmental teach-in. But a case could be made that Earth Day and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970) both had their roots in 1962 with the publication of *Silent Spring* by [Rachel Carson](#). Ms. Carson’s book drew public attention to the misuse and long-term hazards of synthetic pesticides such as DDT; another instance in which the energy, eloquence, and persistence of one person captured the public’s imagination and prompted government to act in the public interest.



Earth Day, Flyer for 25th Anniversary Celebration
Image: Nelson Collection, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies & Wisconsin Historical Society