

2019 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Firdaus Muhammad (Essex High School, Freshman)

Second Place

Jackson Maiocco (Bellows Falls Union High School, Senior)

Third Place

Joseph Brody (St. Johnsbury Academy, Senior)

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Megan Benway (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, Junior)

Thomas Buckley (Colchester High School, Freshman)

Brendyn Byrne (Essex High School, Junior)

Caroline Cassell (Hartford High School, Freshman)

Collin Chutter-Cressy (Burlington High School, Senior)

Felicia Daigle (Rice Memorial High School, Junior)

Paige Dean (South Burlington High School, Senior)

Anysa Denby (St. Johnsbury Academy, Sophomore)

Isabelle Desroches (Burr and Burton Academy, Senior)

Livia Greenberg (Stratton Mountain School, Junior)

Seth Harte (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Alexis Jablonski (St. Johnsbury Academy, Senior)

Simon Rosenbaum (Vermont Commons School, Freshman)

Andy Siki (Winooski High School, Senior)

Ragulan Sivakumar (South Burlington High School, Junior)

Fiona Therese (Compass School, Sophomore)

Henry Wu (Essex High School, Junior)

Winner

Firdaus Muhammad (Essex High School, Freshman)

September 11, 2001-- a day that all Americans remember. A day that changed so many lives. A day when I wasn't even alive yet. Yet 9/11 was a day that changed my life. Fast forward eleven years to 2012. I was in third grade and had just made the decision to start wearing the hijab in public. I had awoken that winter morning with the intention to wear my hijab to school, but I was naive. I didn't know that by wearing the hijab, I became a symbol of Islam. I didn't realize that by wearing a piece of cloth on my head, I was suddenly a nine year old representing all 1.7 billion Muslims across the globe.

It's 2019. Eighteen years have passed since 9/11. It's been seven years since I started wearing the hijab publicly. The racism against Muslims has only gotten worse. The hatred and Islamophobia has spread like wildfire, affecting every Muslim in its path. Women's hijabs are being ripped off, racist slurs are being spit at Muslims, and the angry stares have only increased. The rise of Islamophobia during these past years has been exacerbated by President Trump's Travel Ban. On January 27, 2017, President Trump signed the Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States Order. This became known as the Travel Ban or essentially, the Muslim Ban. Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, North Korea, and Venezuela were all affected by this ban. It's not a coincidence that five of these countries have a majority Muslim population.

I clearly remember watching the news with my dad and hearing all the racist names being thrown at Muslims. Being an eleven year old Muslim girl, I couldn't comprehend how people could be so rude and racist to one another. I didn't understand why Muslim families were suddenly being torn apart because they were deemed "unsafe". Why were people suddenly so scared of Muslims? Didn't they know that Islam was a religion founded on peace and justice? A religion of equality and kindness? How can we live in "The Land of the Free" when Muslims are afraid of being targeted based solely on their religion? I am lucky enough to live in Vermont where most people are quite respectful and accepting of each other. But I also know that there are other Muslims who are not so lucky. Those Muslims who feel isolated in their offices, schools, and other public places.

I believe that in order to solve this huge racial problem, we must learn to accept each other's differences. We should not discriminate against others based on their religion. We need to make sure that we represent people as they are, not based on stereotypes. We cannot let the actions of a few people reflect the beliefs of a whole religion. The United States is a country of diversity, a country built by immigrants. Any person who comes from any religion, deserves to feel respected and welcomed in this country.

Second Place

Jackson Maiocco (Bellows Falls Union High School, Senior)

For decades, an excess of military spending has plagued our nation while there are many vital areas that would prosper with the reallocation of some military spending. The majority of our nation's federal budget is dedicated to the military; in 2018, the US spent a grand total of \$623 billion on national defense. This huge sum of money dwarfs the amount that President Trump allocated to the Department of Education: a mere \$68 billion. I know that sounds like a considerable amount of money, so I'll put it in perspective. For every dollar spent on education, nearly \$11 went to the military. This simply can't stand.

In fiscal year 2018, the US Federal Budget was roughly a trillion dollars. President Trump made good on his promise to slash federal budgets, but increased the defense budget by almost 10%. Considering the size of the defense budget, a 10% increase is huge: \$52 billion, to be exact. Areas that were negatively affected by Trump's budget cuts were the Department of Education, which had a 14% budget slash, and the Department of Health and Human Services, which lost 18% of its federal funding. Every country's main goal should be the scientific and social advancement of their citizens and society as a whole, so the damage done by Trump's budget cuts is incredibly detrimental to our nation. Meanwhile, we're pouring unprecedented amounts of money into building tanks that will never see action; according to Eric Husher, former Senior Balkan Intelligence Analyst (1992-1996), there are over 4,000 M1 Abrams tanks sitting in the Nevada desert collecting dust. Keep in mind that it costs upwards of \$4.3 million to assemble an M1 Abrams. So collectively, there's roughly \$17 billion worth of American taxpayers money sitting in a parking lot in Nevada. But wait, it gets worse. These tanks aren't being built for use; they're simply being built to keep a factory running. This needless military spending is incredibly detrimental to our country. Excessive military expenditures results in slower economic growth, and, as outlined above, is simply a waste of money.

The only feasible solution is to gradually decrease military spending, and invest those funds into more worthwhile areas such as education, science, and healthcare. Far right hawks and conservatives might argue that a drastic decrease in military expenditures would leave us exposed and weak, but the evidence states otherwise. In fact, even if we cut our military budget by 80%, we would still have military superiority in the world.

In the words of legendary journalist Hunter S. Thompson, "Every Republican administration since 1952 has let the military-industrial complex loot the treasury and plunge the nation into debt on the excuse of a wartime economic emergency." With no such emergency anywhere in sight, our tax dollars should be spent on more worthwhile investments.

Third Place

Joseph Brody (St. Johnsbury Academy, Senior)

Democracy was founded on the fundamental principle that the power of government is derived from the consent of the governed. Throughout the course of our nation's history, this foundation has been fractured by the disenfranchisement of low-income and minority groups. The Jim Crow laws, for example, prevented African Americans from voting through poll taxes and literacy tests. While the means of voter suppression have become less glaring, the United States continues to systematically suppress underrepresented populations from exercising their Fifteenth Amendment right. In order to ensure that our democracy is accessible and fruitful for all, the United States must abolish Voter ID laws and reform Election Day.

First of all, minorities are silenced by the Voter ID laws. As Attorney General Eric Holder simply stated, "We call those poll taxes." Voter ID laws inhibit minority voters because they present additional barriers to an already problematic voting process. Even though obtaining identification is often touted as "free," Harvard Law School asserts that the cost of supporting documents can exceed \$175. Given that minorities are often in the lowest income brackets, this price can be insurmountable and disproportionately prevents African Americans from receiving identification. The Brennan Center for Justice revealed that nearly 25% of African Americans lack necessary identification in comparison to just 8% of their white counterparts. According to The University of San Diego, the beneficiaries of Voter ID laws are largely "whites and those on the political right." Clearly, this not only alienates minorities, but produces politicians who are not concerned with their interests. The solution is simple: eradicate Voter ID laws. Though many express concern about voter fraud, this fear is baseless. Professor Justin Levitt confirms that there have only been 31 cases of credible voter impersonation since 2000. In short, Voter ID laws are a refurbished Poll Tax; under the mask of "fraud prevention," only the disenfranchised stand to be silenced.

Election Day is a hindrance because it occurs on a Tuesday. The working class cannot afford lost wages or lost energy from standing in hours-long lines. The result of this awkward timing: low-income Americans cannot afford to vote. According to the Pew Research Center, 63% of the most financially secure Americans voted in the 2014 election, while only 20% of the least financially secure were able to make it to the poll. In effect, the population that bears the greatest burdens possesses the least political power. In actuality, Election Day was established on a Tuesday so that farmers wouldn't miss church or market day. The government needs to act with a similar intent and align Election Day with the schedule of the working class. It should be a federally mandated holiday and stretch across Saturday and Sunday. For those unable to vote, absentee ballots should be guaranteed and expedited.

Ultimately, eliminating Voter ID laws and reforming Election Day will make voting accessible to all Americans. Voting is at the heart of democracy, and once this is realized, the quality of life for all Americans will be heightened.

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Megan Benway (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, Junior)

A problem that is growing rapidly in our world would be the increase in children entering foster care due to the opioid crisis. The White House stated that “in 2016, more than two million Americans had an addiction to prescription or illicit opioids.” This shows that there is a huge climb in the amount of people getting addicted. Emily Birnbaum and Maya Lora, writing for The Hill, reported that “the population of children in foster care had risen by 15 percent to 30 percent in just the last four years.” This shows that due to opioid crisis, the foster care system is filling up, and they don’t have enough homes for the children.

The first solution that could help would be to get more funding for the state to use on children and treatments. There has been funding given due to President Trump taking office; “more than \$1 billion in funding has been allocated or spent directly addressing the drug addiction and opioid crisis” (The White House). A couple ways the funding could be used for would be for hiring more social workers. A lot of the children don’t get the attention they need because there are so many cases of children for one person to do.

The second solution would be to make getting treatment easier, not only getting more treatment homes but also making them more affordable. It could go from anywhere from \$650 to \$250 a day (American Addiction Centers). That's a lot of money for someone who is struggling with an addition and could be almost impossible to get. With the funding they can invest “in residential substance treatment program[s] that keeps families together while a parent gets help” (The Hill). By doing this the treatment center is giving the parents an incentive to get better and follow through with the treatment.

The third solution that could help would be keeping the families together. In the paragraph above The Hill mentioned a center where addicts can get help but still be with their families. One thing that would be good about keeping family together is “once [they finish their] treatment and are stable, [they] can reintegrate [the people] into [their] old work and apartment and things that will keep [them] clean and not create unsafe circumstances for [their] children to be taken away”(The Hill). This treatment center could potentially decrease the number of children entering foster care by a lot.

All of the above solutions could help drop the number of children in foster care. This is an important issue because many American children and adults are being affected by this problem. I know from experience that it hurts to be a child who watches their parents rely on drugs, and then one day some random person comes and takes the child away. There needs to be a change, and it must happen fast. If it doesn't I'm afraid that many children and adults will be stuck in a solution that could kill them all.

Thomas Buckley (Colchester High School, Freshman)

Abraham Lincoln reminded us that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Today, America feels almost as divided as it was before the Civil War. Partisan news channels and a primary system that favors playing to the base have produced election cycles lacking in civility and meaningful discussion. However, the erosion of respectful political discourse and the increased polarization of the electorate are not entirely the fault of politicians nor the voters who elect them. They are instead inevitable consequences of the First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system we use to elect our representatives.

First Past the Post (or plurality voting) is a voting system where each voter has one vote and the candidate with the most votes wins. While this system is intuitive and simple, it is fatally flawed. Because plurality voting has only one winner, and one vote per person, it is impossible for elections to have more than two viable candidates. Any additional strong candidates will result in the winner earning less than half of the vote. To illustrate my point, imagine a scenario in which there are three candidates: a center-right candidate, a center-left candidate, and a more liberal candidate. If half of the voters are right-leaning and half are left-leaning, the two left-leaning candidates will inevitably split the liberal vote and lead to an easy conservative victory, whether or not more people would have preferred either one of the two left-leaning options. Therefore, to avoid the negative effects of splitting the vote, voters must vote strategically by voting against the candidate they most prefer to avoid electing the candidate they most dislike. Because voters must vote strategically, elections in FPTP systems produce two major parties defined by their opposition to each other. Campaigns become increasingly negative as the parties compete in a “race to the bottom” to vilify the other party’s candidate instead of promoting their own positive ideas. This is exacerbated by a primary process that favors the most uncompromising candidates.

Attempts to address the problems with FPTP voting are being made. For example, Maine recently transitioned to Ranked Choice Voting, a system where voters can rank their favorite candidates rather than choosing only one option. This improves political discourse and favors moderation because politicians must compete for second place votes as well as first choice votes. Ranked Choice Voting eliminates the incentive for politicians to run negative campaigns. It doesn’t make sense to dismiss the opposition if you want their voters to support you.

Consequently, campaigns under a Ranked Choice system tend to be more civil, with less polarized electorates. When politicians spend all of their time playing to their base, they have no incentive to compromise with the other side, weakening democracy. Because Ranked Choice Voting encourages civil discussion, politicians are more likely to work with each other on issues that are important to the American people. American democracy is broken. We should fix it by changing how we elect our civil servants.

Brendyn Byrne (Essex High School, Junior)

The greatest problem our country faces is not just a national problem, but a problem that affects the entire world -- climate change. Climate change will impact all of the people of the world regardless of race, gender, or social class. If our country does not address this problem, the world will be destroyed. In October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report warning that unless humanity drastically reduces CO₂ emissions, the change to the world's climate will become irreversible. Arctic sea ice will disappear. Sea levels will rise to the point where coastal cities will become completely submerged. Extreme weather will become more frequent. Potable water and food will become more scarce. Yet many people in the United States still deny that climate change exists, or they believe that there is nothing they can do to change the outcome. This ignorance and sense of powerlessness is dangerous at this critical point in time because the solution to climate change requires the people of the world to come together and act as one.

Under the Trump administration, the United States has stopped participating in the global effort to stop climate change. Mr. Trump has stated that the United States will withdraw from the Paris Agreement as soon as possible. This is a rash decision considering the consequences of ignoring climate change. Instead of running away from reality, the United States should accept the responsibility of being a global power and rise to the challenge of saving the world from climate change.

To solve the problem of climate change, it will take a large scale effort. Similar to the American war effort during the Second World War, every American will need to get behind the movement to stop climate change, and it is the government's responsibility to lead the people in this struggle. The government needs to issue stricter regulations on the emissions produced by large businesses. Instead of spending an enormous amount of money on the military, the government needs to invest money for scientific research to stop climate change. The government must offer incentives for people to live sustainably or impose a gas tax to reduce emissions. The United States needs to work with other nations to share ideas and solutions. Jobs can also be created from the work that will be required to clean the environment, on the federal, state, and local level. The public education system has already started educating people about climate change and its dangers. Hopefully, this education will help change the culture so that the American people actively want to address climate change.

In the past, America has proven that it can unify as a nation and tackle global problems. It is simply a matter of Americans seeing the dangers of climate change and realizing that it must be our top priority. We must lead the rest of the world and become a role model for the world. We need to engage the government so that we change ourselves instead of the climate.

Caroline Cassell (Hartford High School, Freshman)

Xenophobia is one of America's greatest debacles. Defined as the fear of foreigners, xenophobia has unnecessarily increased over the past few years due to numerous factors. America was founded by immigrants, yet we now prosecute those flocking here in search of better lives.

American immigration has always fluctuated due to the extent of xenophobia in the country at the time. During World War II numerous Jewish refugees flocked to America seeking safety from the Nazis. Among these people was Albert Einstein, now seen as one of America's greatest minds. We have seen this occurring recently with the immigration ban on Syrian immigrants. In the modern day, war torn Syrian asylum seekers are denied entrance to America and are left living in overcrowded refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan. America's policy: keep them out, they may be terrorists.

Immigrants living inside US borders are being denied the right to naturalize. Children of illegal immigrants who used to be protected under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are now unsure of their safety after DACA was suspended by President Trump. These harmless people whose parents wanted a better life for their children are denied citizenship due to xenophobia. The act of separating families or deporting innocent children to countries where they are unfamiliar with the language and culture is unjust.

My family lived in Saudi Arabia for six years. Living internationally taught me to be open-minded towards everyone; I attended an international school with students from over 100 nations. Every student was like me, and deserved the same rights. When I returned to the America I was alienated by classmates who posed ridiculously ignorant questions such as "Are you Muslim?" "Are you going to bomb the school?"

The issue at hand is fear. Americans need to open their eyes and educate themselves about the world, not just their country. Only 36% of all Americans have passports, and organizations such as the U.S. Peace Corps, which encourage world connections are struggling to find volunteers. We must eliminate our fear through education. By educating citizens about the outside world, whether it be by inviting more refugees into our country, sending more Americans abroad to do service work, or having immigrants talk about their experiences, we will be able to reduce hatred and fear. We don't need a wall, we need to tear down our own walls of ignorance and hatred.

Without immigrants, America would not be the extraordinary country it is today. Through history, we have looked down on immigrants, and have created "nativist" groups who yearned to exclude immigrants from their society. Everyone deserves the rights that all Americans have; many do not have the access to such rights in their home countries. By excluding those willing to become citizens, we not only deny them opportunities in this country, but we deny them of their rights. Let's "Make America Great Again": let's educate each-other about the world around us and share our rights with those in search of better lives.

Collin Chutter-Cressy (Burlington High School, Senior)

Where do you imagine the human race being in 20 years? 50 years? The effects of climate change should be front and center in our minds when fantasizing about a space age world. The human desire for technology and cheap cost of living negates responsibility to the environment. Climate change means more than a rise of a few seemingly insignificant degrees over centuries of human innovation and industrialization; however, the rising oceans and temperatures, animal extinction, and increased natural disasters are the real world effects that cost us an increasing amount of money, resources, and even human lives to sweep under the rug.

One of the main effects of climate change is the rise of ocean height and temperature. According to NASA, a federally funded organization, the sea level will rise 1-4 feet by the year 2100. This is in addition to the eight inch rise in sea levels since 1880. A rise of 1-4 feet in sea levels is comparable to the shallow end of a swimming pool, but in the real world means millions of homes and businesses destroyed on the vulnerable coastline, which cannot be restored as we do with hurricanes and tornadoes. Climate change by itself may not seem to be a huge issue, but the ripple effect it creates causes colossal damage.

When solving these problems, we cannot think of our own lives, but rather future generations. Humans do not have the power to predict the future, but we can shape the future. There are two parts to the solution of climate change: Mitigation and Adaptation. Adaptation is adjusting to the effects of climate change. This plan does not deal with the issue of slowing and preventing climate change, but with preventing the effects of global warming from changing the way people live, even if it does change where they live. Mitigation is reducing the amount of greenhouse gases that are released into the atmosphere. For mitigation to be a viable solution to solve the earth's warming, we need need a global plan for a global problem. This means that, as a global community, we need laws to promote and enforce renewable energy (solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal,) sustainable houses and buildings, eliminate litter, cut down on trash, cut down on resource use, the list goes on. This intensive process requires a change in mindset, and support and participation from all people in all nations.

Let the US stand where the world knows it to be, one step ahead of others, and carry all nations to the solution of global warming. We know the mass destruction that global warming can cause, and the best solution to counter it. So now let the question we ask not be what we imagine the world to be in 20 years, but what is necessary to get there.

Felicia Daigle (Rice Memorial High School, Junior)

The world today revolves around our dependency on convenience. We live in a society that works to make our lives easier through inventions like drive-thrus and one-use items. Ignoring the effects of this dependency has resulted in an environmental crisis that seems to be too great to fix. The fact that 18 million pounds of plastic enters our oceans annually should shock our generation and instill a sense of ownership about this issue (Howard). Realizing that plastic dominates most of our consumerism and convenience needs should prioritize reducing its production. The way to treat this issue would be by placing a ban on unnecessary plastic goods and an emphasis on teaching students about our oceans and environment instead of ignoring the problem.

By banning plastic accommodations like straw, bags, and bottles, over 14 billion tons of plastic waste could be prevented (Howard). The United States would be joining other nations like the United Kingdom and India in an effort to reduce plastic waste. The European Commission proposed, “a ban on 10 common items that it says make up about 70 percent of the litter in EU waters. This includes plastic straws, drink stirrers, plates, and more” (Howard). All these items seem to make life easier but they have become the reason for the world’s struggles with plastic pollution.

When we share the knowledge about how harmful plastic has become, then we take responsibility about choosing a plastic water bottle because it's easy. I only learned about the dire state of our oceans a few years ago when I walked on the beaches in Santa Barbara and saw plastic Starbucks cups and straws intertwined with the seaweed that had washed up onto shore. From that moment I realized that plastic does not go anywhere but into landfills and if we keep producing more and more, none of our beaches will have no plastic debris. If schools took action and speak about plastic waste, there would be no excuse for our ignorance regarding the planet’s environmental state.

Taking plastic pollution seriously, starting by a national ban on straws, bags, and water bottles, would be the first step in the right direction. We cannot undo the past, but the future lies in the decisions we start making today. Plastic, a man-made product, cannot keep killing thousands of sea creatures without our government trying to enforce some kind of change. If the United States does not understand its dire need for plastic reduction, our future generations will never know the ocean with plastic filling them.

Paige Dean (South Burlington High School, Senior)

Members of Congress, I come before you today to speak about something that is near to my heart. I spend my summers sailing on beautiful Lake Champlain in my home state of Vermont, and every Fourth of July my family and I kayak out into Burlington Bay and watch the fireworks. The lake is part of many Vermonters' lives; from childhood jokes about Champ, our local lake monster, to walks along the shore and trips across on the ferry, our Lake Champlain has been an integral part of the Vermont experience.

But today, Lake Champlain is suffering, just as the rest of America is. Devastating hurricanes in the South are displacing us and flooding our homes and businesses. Droughts and wildfires in the West raze the ground, destroy our property, prevent our crops from growing and force us to flee. Our shining seas are encroaching on our plentiful shores, the water lapping ever closer, year by year, to our front stoop. Summers are getting hotter, and storms wilder. We all know the cause, and what it means for us. Climate change is real. We are experiencing it right here, right now. Science does not lie, and all around our nation we are seeing it firsthand. The homeowners in Louisiana who can't sell because their house is in a flood zone, the farmers in Arizona whose crops are withering from drought, the schoolchildren in Flint, Michigan, whose tap water is unsafe to drink, and those Vermont who can't utilize their lake due to dangerous algae blooms.

Every single thing I have listed has its roots in our own actions. However we twist it, the facts remain: we are responsible for climate change.

There is still hope. If we act now, we can lessen the effects of climate change on our homes and livelihoods. I call now on Congress to pass and support strong and direct legislation to help our environment and economy. Strengthen the EPA! Ensure that this vital agency has the resources and leadership necessary to protect our lands and create real change. Pass legislation tightening regulations, taxing and limiting the production and spread of pollutants, give incentives to alternative clean and sustainable energy companies, move to limit our reliance on oil and gas, and make America energy independent and sustainable. We have thousands of capable scientists, business leaders, policy experts and engaged citizens ready to work on solutions and save our planet. Let them! Work with our allies and neighbors to mitigate climate change worldwide. Rejoin and support the Paris Climate Agreement! Climate change affects our whole planet, and only global solutions and partnership will solve it. Let's work on fostering the clean energy and environmental protection programs of other countries through incentives and aid, especially to developing countries while promoting energy independence.

Solutions are in our grasp, we only have to believe in them, reach out, and grab them. Otherwise, we are doing ourselves, the people of America, and indeed the whole world a great disservice. The world's future, America's future, our future is at stake. Act now.

Anysa Denby (St. Johnsbury Academy, Sophomore)

Fighting for Women's Reproductive Rights

In America, women are still continually fighting for women's reproductive rights 70 years after *Roe vs. Wade* was passed. While many people agree that women have a right to their own body, many politicians still engage in an unrelenting and increasingly aggressive attacks on women's reproductive health care. They do this by introducing and passing unconstitutional bills that would restrict women's rights, for example by stifling access to essential health care and endangering women's lives. To put this into perspective, this, that means hundreds of women's rights are being taken away with each restriction passed, according to the National Reproductive Rights Organization. A possible solution is the Women's Health Protection Act which would prevent states from passing these dangerous legislations and would prohibit state and federal politicians from imposing a range of dangerous anti-choice provisions that take away women's rights and choice over their own body.

In his first year in office, Trump and his administration have brought an aggressive campaign against women's sexual and reproductive rights to the White House, by limiting women's access to birth control and his anti-abortion advocacy. To understand the administration's emphasis on rolling back birth control access and abortion rights, it's important to remember the administration is filled with people who have a track record of anti-abortion legislation and advocacy throughout the years such as Vice President Mike Pence and Trump's top healthcare advisor Katy Talento. Trump administration's 2018-'22 draft plan for Health and Human Services, for the first time ever suggested the federal health agency will now be "serving and protecting Americans at every stage of life, beginning at conception." this language about conception and unborn children signals a shift toward faith-based decision-making in American health care. But women's rights are not based on the faith or beliefs of the government officials but rather each woman's individual choice, therefore the decision should be up the person whose body is being affected and not a single groups beliefs.

The Women's Health Protection Act would prevent states from passing these dangerous legislations and would prohibit state and federal politicians from imposing a range of dangerous anti-choice provisions. Senator Sanders needs to expand and protect the reproductive rights of women by continuing to fight and support for The Women's Health Protection Act, and by bringing attention to this continuing struggle for equality and individual choice over one's own body. Senator Sanders also can fight to keep Planned Parenthood funded and covered by Medicaid, as attacking Planned Parenthood remains a priority for social conservatives in our Congress today. As of right now 2.5 million people rely on Planned Parenthood for a range of health care services, like birth control and cancer screenings, and defunding it would change the health of millions of Americans as found in the article "How Women's reproductive rights stalled under Trump" by Julia Belluz. So therefore I am not only asking for continuing support for women's reproductive rights but also the health of millions of Americans.

Isabelle Desroches (Burr and Burton Academy, Senior)

Civility in local politics is a topic of increasing importance. As we attempt to compromise on enormous national issues such as immigration, health care, and foreign policy, intense polarization has created unbearable tension between parties, and leads almost daily to an absence of civil discourse. Even more terrifying a sight in recent years is the aggression and polarity that has seeped into local elections through overly-aggressive yard signs, tempestuous town meetings, and neighborhood altercations that craft rifts in our communities. Hopefully, we can shift these themes before courtesy in both national and local politics dies, and my generation is left sans civility in our system.

We seem to be coming upon an age of wildly strong convictions. Although history classes dive into both pros and cons of political circumstances (such as the eras of Andrew Jackson or Lincoln), citizens and politicians are more resistant than ever to accept the yin/yang relationship that can be found in any political situation. Anyone who follows news is chronically frustrated by this double standard. What we must come to accept as a nation is that none of the pressing issues that face us today can be solved without a common language of civility.

Rollo May, an existential psychologist, wrote about conviction in *The Courage to Create*. “The relationship between commitment and doubt is by no means an antagonistic one. Commitment is healthiest when it is not without doubt, but in spite of doubt,” he wrote. May understands what we must come to embrace and apply to our politics: our convictions are strongest when we can cast doubt upon our own stance. A position without doubt causes ignorance and paralyzation of thought. It is courageous to doubt yourself and keep an open mind. We learn this in school, yet students are often hard-pressed to find admirable examples of these philosophies in our lives and on the national stage. As politics become increasingly heated, we can agree that it is more important than ever to preserve integrity and traditional decorum in local elections as well; movements like this must initiate in the strong roots of our society—our tight-knit communities. Our government must set a precedent of positive influence and etiquette so that progress and compromise can finally begin. We must work to create a climate of dialogue instead of hostile debate, both in communities and gradually on a national scale. Civility in politics is the foundation of the progress we need to make in the coming years. Actively working towards an attitude in politics that allows us to work in a bipartisan fashion, and incorporate doubt in our convictions and empathy in our approach is the only way we can ensure the survival of our American political system as it was intended.

Livia Greenberg (Stratton Mountain School, Junior)

The chest closes as the throat tightens like a python strangling its prey, the skin burning as it breaks out in angry hives and rashes, forcing one to claw at their body as a lack of oxygen begins to shut down vital organs. This is an allergic reaction — one that can be experienced by the 15 million Americans with food allergies, one of whom sent to the hospital due to a reaction every three minutes. The device used to stop reactions, called an EpiPen, can be made for thirty dollars; however, the lifesaving instrument retails for 600 dollars. The exorbitant price of the EpiPen is a result of domination over the healthcare market, with nothing stopping the company from raising prices exponentially. Unfortunately, the EpiPen is not the only example of why monopoly capitalism is an immoral system that abuses the consumers who are in need of medical help. Multiple monolithic companies are forcing those with medical needs to pay prodigious amounts for necessities, a practice that must be broken apart with government intervention.

Shattering medical monopolies needs to be one of the country's priorities, and the most feasible solution to do so is to create a new act that would outlaw inflexible patents and bolster smaller companies financially. The federal government currently uses three anti-trust acts as a guideline for what is a legal or illegal trust, but because none of the acts address copyright, colossal companies have avoided punishment by patenting products or drugs in a manner that makes an alternative product illegal to sell. Even remotely similar products have been banned by the FDA and are not allowed to be sold. By creating a law that prohibits exceedingly unalterable patents, cheaper products would be allowed into the healthcare market. With a government loan, small-scale companies can develop the alternative competition, which would drive the companies that currently have a monopoly into lowering their prices in order to sell their product. In addition to reducing the cost of medical necessities, the consumers would have more freedom to choose which product they trust in case of an emergency and better access to medication essential for life.

While both an ethical and economic issue, trusts are a problem that can be solved with strong government action that keeps the wellbeing of the American citizens at the forefront of concern. No one in the United States should die because of an inability to afford medication due to corporate greed. Creating a new anti-trust act will allow for more companies to develop and sell vital medications at a more accessible price, and will stop companies from nailing in innocent people's coffins.

Seth Harte (Burlington High School, Freshman)

I'm the kid that dreams of writing movies but is reluctant because I've heard too many stories of writers that fail. I love soccer and want to play in the MLS but know how few make it. I want to be an attorney someday but all I hear is how expensive it is to go to law school. All of this noise makes me feel like there is no way to succeed. But can't I try? I am starting to believe that we close the door before we can open it because defeat feels inevitable. Our society does not see the beauty in failing so we instead we just quit. I believe this is because of our history, our grading systems, and social media.

We learn from an elementary school age that we should never fail and this philosophy is exhibited repeatedly throughout our schooling and into adulthood. We are taught that to mess up is the worst thing we can do because we have survived so long with a mindset that believes we will succeed. Although believing in ourselves is good it makes it hard for us to fail with dignity and the knowing that messing up is okay. According to MedBroadcast, one of the main reasons for suicide is because of failure. We just can not handle failing, in fact, we cannot deal with it so much that we end everything because of a setback.

Our grading system has made it so only a specific type of learner will succeed. It has also taught us that the word failure means that we have been defeated or we did something wrong. The reality is that if we tried we didn't fail. I believe that children should not be punished for that. Psychology Today said that one of the leading reasons for stress for students was the need to get A's. I believe that Vermont should lean toward proficiency-based learning because it gets away from the letter grade and lets kids learn at their own pace.

Social media has taken the 21st-century teens by a storm. According to a 2015 study, the Washington Post said that teens consume nine hours a day of social media. As a teenager myself, I constantly see examples of people showing off their success which is nice; however, it makes a lot of people feel bad about themselves. We should work towards a goal of producing more positive content.

Our views of failure are false and missed interpreted, however, if you can treat failure as not what we've been taught all our lives but treat it as a way to improve as a human race and individuals we will grow tremendously know that one failure will not determine your life, getting straight A's are not needed to succeed and that there is more behind what looks like that perfect photo. If I can go through life believing this I know I will become that pro soccer player, that attorney or that writer.

Alexis Jablonski (St. Johnsbury Academy, Senior)

Aldous Huxley, the author of “Brave New World,” seems to have predicted the Trumpian era of disillusion and fear of immigrants. However, the basic idea of welcoming immigrants is central to our way of life; our diversity makes us stronger. Unfortunately, these values are being threatened. Current immigration policy is shifting toward exclusion of immigrant populations and has awakened an anti-immigrant sentiment that does not align with the historical importance of immigration in the U.S. These concepts are essential to America’s identity of inclusivity, and they need to be protected as we have gone under such a dramatic shift in power and ideals. Trump continually spews blatant falsehoods which undermine that character of immigrant communities, in order to secure his campaign promise of a wall. It has become evident that our president will continue to use hateful rhetorical devices toward immigrant populations simply for his own benefit. When in fact, his beliefs and promises do not align with that of the American people. As demonstrated in Huxley’s novel, when we isolate those we deem as the other, we are constricting our growth as a nation.

A prime example of an attempt to dehumanize and marginalize people through the news is Trump’s commentary on the Migrants passage through Mexico. Trump has continually used fear tactics to dehumanize outsiders and justify our hostility toward them. The media typically presents the migrants through an overhead image of a crowd, thus neglecting their humanity. “The Caravan” is an excuse to not view people as human. According to our president, they are rapists, drug dealers, killers, deceitful, job stealing terrorists coming in by the thousands. This information is simply false, and aimed to incite fear among Americans. Unfortunately today, our President’s hateful rhetoric toward outsiders has reframed our former charitable nature toward immigrant populations. The image of the migrant people must be adjusted. We must look at their faces to see their individual humanity, rather than a single entity.

We must remember the pillars by which our Nation was founded on, those of which make it great. The fundamental notion of inviting immigrants into our communities and providing them with equal opportunities to thrive is integral to our lifestyle. We have promised ourselves as Nation to provide stability to outsiders. We are an entire nation based on blended cultures and thoughts; these values are what offer us strength.

During Donald Trump’s presidential campaign Americans were fascinated by his explosive personality. Unfortunately, over the past two years, we have learned that was not merely a campaign tactic. His continual attacks on American democracy have activated catalysts for change. We will no longer stand by, entranced and misinformed. We must encourage activism and open discussion to promote understanding, we must evaluate our media consumption and make educated decisions, and we must actively seek the truth, in a world that is overwhelming us with inflamed rhetoric. Only then, will we escape this self-inflicted Brave New World.

Simon Rosenbaum (Vermont Commons School, Freshman)

When I was thirteen, I had twenty-one cents thrown at me. For a moment, I didn't process what was happening. I looked up to see one of my classmates looking back at me, waiting to see how I would react. I left the change on the table, and left the lunchroom in the direction of my next class. Instead, I shut myself in a bathroom stall and cried. My name is Simon Rosenbaum and I've been Jewish my entire life. I wear a yarmulke to school and often can't attend school events that are on Friday nights because they interfere with the sabbath. However, I haven't always practiced self-acceptance.

I began wearing a yarmulke halfway through seventh grade. I remember weeks of emotional preparation for the snide remarks and lost friends that were sure to come. Before the morning bell had even rung, my kippah had already been grabbed and torn off. This was the result of the few Jewish kids in the school pretending that they weren't Jewish for fear of retribution from their classmates. I'm sad to say that they were right. Vermont is an extremely non-diverse state. According to Pew Research Center, over 93% of Vermonters are white, and approximately 94% of Vermonters are Christian or have majority Christian heritage. Approximately two percent of Vermonters are Jewish, out of the eight to eleven percent of Vermonters that practice non-Christian faiths. These non-diverse societies lead to non-tolerant kids.

When I was in eighth grade, a paraeducator made Mein Kampf required reading for students who she did not believe were working hard enough. I later learned that she only engaged in this behavior around Jewish students. To this day, she works in a Vermont middle school after a school investigation "didn't find any incriminating evidence". Anti-Semitic incidents are far more commonplace in schools today than most educators like to admit. According to a study for The Washington Post, in 2018 a study reported that 69% of young Jews in America said that they had "personally experienced discrimination because of their faith". This is up from 39% in 2013 from the same study.

We can solve the issue of anti-Semitism in our schools by a variety of actions. We should begin by instituting diversity experts as consultants on three month pilot periods in every Vermont school to observe systematic and ignorance based anti-semitism. Those consultants would then make recommendations in the changing of diversity education to the school board. If the board were to refuse the recommendations by the consultant, the consultant could then appeal to the State Board of Education. Another course of action we should be taking is to create a zero-tolerance policy on anti-Semitism both inside and outside of schools. If kids are shown the right examples while seeing the wrong ones punished, then the precedent will be set for an effective change in our diversity education. No educated child or adult would ever take joy from a thirteen year old crying in the bathroom.

Andy Siki (Winooski High School, Senior)

Climate Change

“It’s not enough to think it’s important. We must make it urgent,” says Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a congresswoman from New York.

Vermont is taking action on global warming by reducing energy use and investing in clean energy. It is accomplishing these goals by using low carbon transportation, protecting farms, making the community green and resilient, and recycling and composting. By 2050 Vermont should be using 90% of clean energy sources. I’m part of The Youth Lobby For Climate Change. We organize an annual rally at the State House to show legislators that young people care about their future. We talk about what we’re doing right now, our future as a state, and what will help our communities.

In 2016 electricity made up 28% of emission in our environment. Solar power and other renewable energy sources can reduce that number. Vermont already started putting solar panels in homes, businesses, and schools to make a cleaner environment. Recently Elon Musk made a Tesla battery to store the energy from solar panels inside a house. The length of Vermont winters might make that storage difficult, but that’s a problem we need to fix. By using solar energy, Vermont could reach the goal of using 90% renewable energy sources by 2050. Transportation makes up 28% of the CO₂ emissions. And Vermont can reduce this greenhouse gas emission. We could have more bikes on the road, even an electric assisted bike and a bike path. Karl Kemnitzer works with solar bikes, and he said: “Bikes and solar are a good combination, and it's also been a lot of fun! An average solar panel puts out around 16 watts per square foot.... the bike is so efficient. I find that over a long term, I am using about 200 watts on average as I ride along.” Kemnitzer now needs to fit enough solar panels on a bike. He’s taking an engineering class and working on that problem.

Schools should start getting students involved in their community. Schools can help affect our environment by recycling, reducing, and composting food waste. At the Youth Climate Leaders Academy students from Vermont and New Hampshire came together to make goals for their schools. We worked on composting and made a goal to start composting by January 2019. We would start in our classrooms then move to the cafeteria.

Everyone wants to take action to change things but not everyone does. At the Climate Leaders Academy I learned that you have to start by making small changes and that will lead to big changes. If Vermonters fix the small problem in their communities, we can not only affect the whole state but also influence other states around us.

Ragulan Sivakumar (South Burlington High School, Junior)

The Waste Land

In the year 2015, the United States produced 262.4 million tons of waste, 130.63 million tons of which were landfilled. That is equivalent to 2.23 lbs. / day / American person of waste landfilled. Landfilling at such a great rate requires us to create new landfills, taking away from scenic beauty while also requiring us to use more natural resources to create new products, costing us with long-term sustainability as well. To address the United States' waste problem, taxes must be put on the producers of materials that become waste, a governmental recycling program must be created, and stricter recycling laws must be imposed.

Firstly, a landfill tax should be imposed on producers to reduce the net amount of waste. Landfills they take up areas that could otherwise be used and lose us many recyclable components, making them a detriment economically. Environmentally, landfills enhance climate change by forcing decomposition to occur anaerobically, producing methane, which, according to the EPA, is over 25 times as efficient as carbon dioxide at trapping heat. Since landfills hurt economically and environmentally, a landfill tax should be imposed by ton of waste. This tax would cause producers to reduce their landfill waste while also creating an incentive for corporations to create more sustainable and effective waste management programs. As the United Kingdom has shown, a landfill tax can be incredibly effective, reducing the number of landfills by 2/3 in 8 years. With the passing years, the tax could progressively increase, further incentivizing the movement from waste, reducing our waste problem all the while.

Secondly, a governmental recycling program should also be created to complement the landfill tax. While the waste-reducing reasons are obvious, the other incentive is that recycling is a massive industry. As China has shown, recycling is a \$200 billion industry. Thus, the United States could create its own governmental recycling program via some of the revenue from the landfill tax project, providing countless jobs while also alleviating our waste problems by making waste management feasible. Moreover, the recycling program would obtain the base materials for industry through recycling which could then be resold off, making the entire ordeal economically viable while also reducing our waste.

Lastly, stricter recycling laws must be imposed. According to the EPA, only 67% of paper is recycled, 26% of glass, 34% of metals, and 9% of plastics, making it is obvious that stricter recycling laws are needed. Imposing a fine for violators would ensure that recycling guidelines are followed. Since no one would want to incur a fine for something so menial, stricter recycling laws would enable the US to tackle the waste problem.

In summation, the US has a waste problem and must address the issue. We cannot continue with 130.63 million tons of landfilled waste each year. By implementing the policies noted above, our country would no longer be "the waste land": it would be a model for the rest of the world in waste management.

Fiona Therese (Compass School, Sophomore)

There is a picture of me on the wall, near our kitchen table. It was taken when I was five years old and entering kindergarten. I was wearing a yellow dress and wearing a big sun hat. The girl standing next to me, Ashley, was leaning on me and smiling. She was to become my best friend.

School is supposed to be safe and fun. It's supposed to be where you learn about new things and experiment with new ideas. It's supposed to prepare you for challenges in the future. But today, too many of us are scared of school because we don't know what might happen while we are there. I was ten when I heard about the shooting in Sandy Hook. It was the first time I realized that school might also be unsafe and that someone might want to harm us. The state of our country is one of confusion for us, as students. We are expected to go to school trusting that nothing can happen. But the truth is, every day across the country there are reports of gun violence. Even in my small school, we have drills so that we'll know what to do if someone comes to school to attack us.

In 2018, 113 people have been killed or injured in a school shooting. On average, a shooting takes place at least once every eight days that school is in session. After a shooting takes place, I have heard what people express their sympathy through 'thoughts and prayers.' The time for prayers is over. We need change. Children should not fear going to school. I should not have to look around my classroom and plan a possible escape. I should be able to go to school with the same optimism that I had when I was five.

The state of our union is one of fear because our country has not passed adequate gun control. How many people need to speak out about their lost children, family or friends before a change happens?

Guns rights advocates argue that our right to bear arms is protected in the Constitution. I disagree. I believe that the Constitution is a living document, one that transcribes our aspirations and hope. In a letter to James Madison in 1789, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "No society can make a perpetual constitution. The earth belongs always to the living generation and not to the dead." It is time to demand change. The state of our union might be one of fear, but I have also seen hope. The hope that I see comes not from our legislature in Washington, D.C., but in the protests across the country. My generation is on the move. We are working hard to make our country and our schools safe again. Although these are difficult times, I have seen that even young people can be powerful when they work together. The state of our union is in the hands of those who protest, those who march, those who write letters, and those who demand change. So what is the state of our union? It's one where fear must be met with strength and I'm proud to be a member of a generation who is rising up to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Henry Wu (Essex High School, Junior)

It is the year 2060. You and your grandchildren are watching the charred Earth slowly recede from view within your space capsule. “What happened?” they ask. You breathe a deep sigh fraught with regret and anger as you reluctantly tell the story of the Earth’s demise.

“It all began in the 1970s...”

When Exxon researchers learned that the burning of fossil fuels influences climate, they hid their findings from the public. Other fossil fuel companies were complicit in denying the existence of the greenhouse effect for decades. Today, the oil and coal industries are still the main drivers of carbon emissions, and \$20 billion in annual U.S. government subsidies perpetuates our dependence on them.

“Our hunger for oil and coal was insatiable. We ate and ate, but it poisoned us. We loved our cars and our plastics, but they killed us...”

The use of fossil fuels for transportation, electricity, and plastic production releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, trapping heat. Rising global temperatures and more severe and frequent natural disasters have already devastated human lives. In as few as twelve years, rising sea levels and droughts will lead to severe food shortages, heightened political instability, and widespread poverty. A recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report found that limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C, the target of the Paris Agreement, will still cause \$54 trillion in damage.

“Back in Vermont, I was a teenager when I first noticed the unbearable summer heat that made breathing difficult and forgot what a white Christmas felt like. These were merely inconveniences, but that all change in a few years. The searing wildfires and crippling hurricanes that made headlines in California and the Carolinas soon became commonplace. Entire cities vanished from the map because they were submerged underwater. Could we have avoided this?”

The efforts of individuals - taking shorter showers, using public transit, going vegetarian - can only do so much, but it’s large companies that wield influence over our government and society. A carbon tax that fines businesses for pollution is an effective method of keeping them in check. It’s a regenerative economic measure that could fund renewable energy research and implementation.

However, ordinary citizens still must help avoid catastrophe. In the end, our politicians and business leaders have a say in our nation’s energy infrastructure, but it is our duty to convince them to adopt necessary changes. We must write to our members of Congress and tell them to resist corporate power. We must elect officials who will champion a carbon tax, and we must fulfill our end of the deal in giving up fossil fuels for renewable energy sources. So, what story will we tell our grandchildren? A lament of despair and regret, or a tale of teamwork and hope? The decisions we make today will provide the answer. Breaking our fossil fuel addiction and investing in renewables are drastic yet necessary efforts. The best time for action was forty years ago, but the next best time is now.