

PART

# One

## The Challenges America Faces

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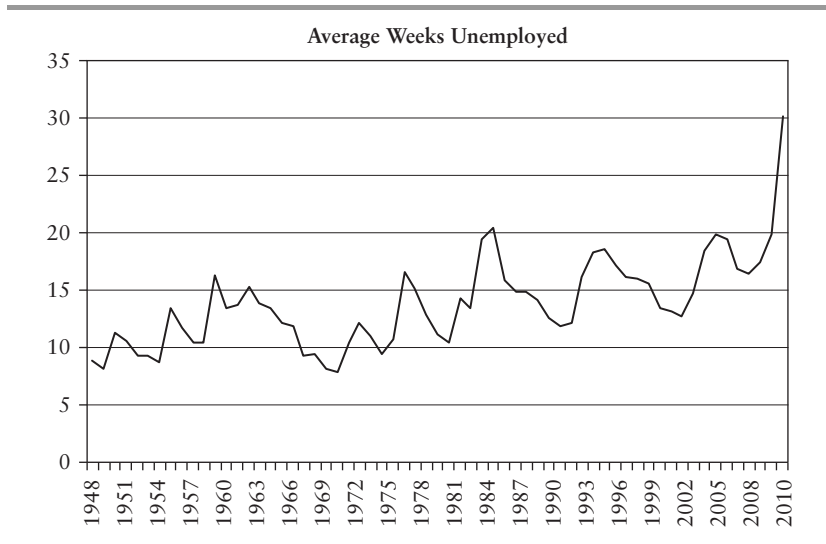
# Chapter 1 Why Buying American Is Critical

Why is the massive trade imbalance a critical problem for you and me?

With so many immediate problems facing us, personally and as a society, it's easy to ignore broad and seemingly distant problems. But many of the challenges we face as a nation today—a decaying economy, unemployment, falling wages, lack of opportunity, spiraling government debt, fractures spreading through every level of our economy—can be traced back to one source: the massive trade deficit. Our immediate personal issues, and the larger issues facing our country, are intimately related, and so are the solutions.

Recessions are getting longer and deeper. We are facing more, and more extended, periods of high unemployment. Even those who did everything right may spend months or even years unemployed (see Figure 1.1). So-called experts eager to calm our collective nerves talk about “jobless recoveries” and other such nonsense, but the concept is just that—nonsense.

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**FIGURE 1.1 Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey**

The simple fact that we are not trading in a sustainable way with other countries impacts jobs, wages, product safety, and many other areas of our daily lives. The reality of our economic decline has already affected millions of people and will hit tens of millions more in the near future.

This is not just theory for huge numbers of our citizens. People all around us are being hit, and hit hard, through no fault of their own. One acquaintance, a CPA who had built a solid career, faced nearly two years of unemployment after losing his job early in the most recent downturn. The loss had nothing to do with his performance; the company simply had shrunk so significantly that there was no way to avoid being cut. In his midfifties and with kids in college, he was forced to spend much of his savings just when he should have been shoring up for retirement. He recently accepted a job where he makes about 40 percent less than he did in his previous job.

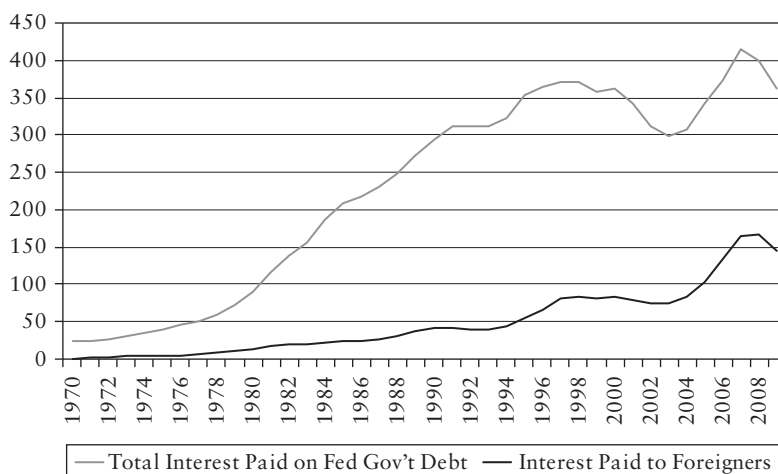
A customer who called [MadeinUSAForever.com](http://MadeinUSAForever.com) mentioned to me that she is the primary caretaker for her 15-year-old granddaughter, and that her work hours have been cut significantly. Fortunately, she has not lost her job—yet—but the reduced pay has caused a very real

problem, and she is unsure how she will pay for her granddaughter's braces. But her worst fear is losing that job.

These are just two examples among many. Every one of us knows good, hardworking people facing similar hardships. Wages are down, and many of those who have managed to find jobs after extended unemployment are earning only 50 to 60 percent of what they used to make. Most of us could find ourselves in that position, abruptly out of a job despite solid performance, and with nothing but a year or two of unemployment standing between us and hard times.

Our deindustrialization exacerbates another growing problem. Many local and state governments—and, soon, even the federal government—are facing a severe lack of tax revenue cash coming in. If something doesn't change quickly, these government entities will soon find themselves unable to fulfill pension commitments, or provide even basic services. Our federal government has already had to borrow heavily from foreigners, and is becoming more dependent on them every year (see Figures 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4).

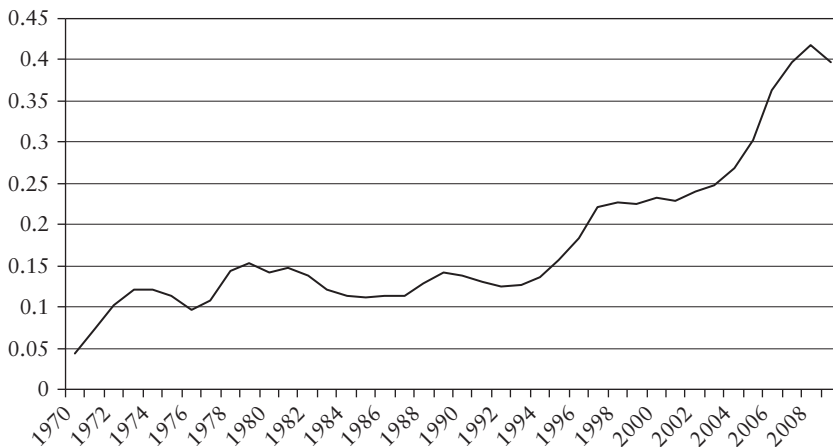
We hear “there's no easy answer,” and that may be true, but there is a simple one. In most cases, the economic activity that manufacturing creates would generate the revenues necessary to support our cities and states. Without that activity, governments at every level



**FIGURE 1.2 Interest Paid on U.S. Federal Debt**

*Data Source:* Bureau of Economic Analysis.

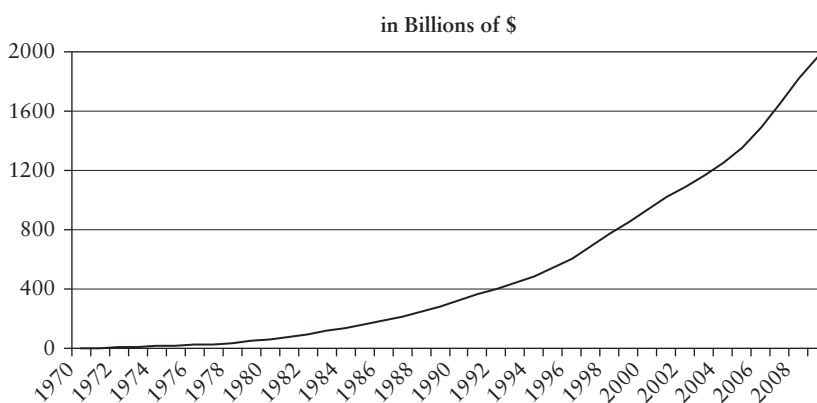
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**FIGURE 1.3 Percentage of Federal Debt Interest Paid to Foreigners**

*Data Source:* Bureau of Economic Analysis.

will face permanently lower tax revenue collections, which will crimp their ability to borrow, causing many to collapse financially. Financial collapse would mean a depression era for decades to come, marked by extremely high unemployment rates, low wages where there are jobs, and even hunger for many.



**FIGURE 1.4 Cumulative Federal Debt Interest Paid to Noncitizens (1970–2009)**

*Data Source:* Bureau of Economic Analysis.

It's tempting to blame the federal budget deficit on overspending in Washington, but the truth is more complex, with multiple factors coming into play. A lack of tax revenue coming in the door, due to a declining economy, limits the ability of any governmental entity to do its job. Raising taxes may seem like the solution to some, but with the decline in both employment and average wages, the income available for taxing has also declined. And in a faltering economy, increasing taxes does further harm, since consumers then have even less disposable income to feed into the system. Every year, hundreds of billions of dollars leave our country to pay for imports. With more strategic spending, those dollars could help to rebuild our economy, crumbling infrastructure, or educational system. No nation's economy can withstand that kind of wealth transfer for long, and we're seeing clear signs that we've reached the breaking point.

Our middle class is already fading. We once took it for granted that our children would lead better lives than we did, yet today many young people look at their parents' jobs with the envy of those who have witnessed something that can never be theirs.

Many once-great cities are facing unemployment rates so high that disenchantment grows. In some, unemployment rates for people under 30 are at 30 to 40 percent. A significant sector of the generation we need to lead our country into the future has no stake in our society, and little or no personal experience to demonstrate that working hard and creating quality products is in any way tied to personal or collective success. Those young people with no vested interest in our society have little to lose, and thus are more susceptible to involvement in crime and drugs. A few short decades of massive deficits have taken us from a golden age to an era of growing despair. That's why it's so critical that we act now to reduce the trade deficit by buying American-made products, and that we begin immediately, before the situation spirals further out of control.

This is not a detached concept or a philosophical political issue best left to those in academia to sort out. The choices you and I make every day, every time we step up to a checkout counter or place an order online, affect the future of the United States, our personal economic futures, and the kind of world our children will live in.

In later chapters, I'll talk in more depth about specific problems and possible solutions, but first let's look at the basics: the top 10 reasons

I believe you should buy products made here in the USA, as listed on [MadeinUSAForever.com](http://MadeinUSAForever.com).

**10. FOREIGN LABOR STANDARDS ALLOW UNSAFE WORKER CONDITIONS IN MANY COUNTRIES. WHEN YOU BUY AMERICAN, YOU SUPPORT NOT ONLY AMERICAN MANUFACTURERS BUT ALSO AMERICAN WORKERS, SAFE WORKING CONDITIONS, AND CHILD LABOR LAWS.**

At Chinese factories, even “model” facilities used by contractors that build for Apple, HP, and others similar, suicide is common. I know from experience in the technology industry and working in Asia that these contract manufacturers bid below cost to win deals with well-known companies like Apple. After they win the contract, they put extreme pressure on their employees to drive down their costs to a point at which the contract is profitable. Again, that’s at the “good” factories! I have seen Chinese contract manufacturers take it a step further: They make up for losing money by passing work to subcontractors that cut every corner. Working conditions are far worse at these subcontractors—which, in fact, make up the majority of the actual production. Those subcontractors may then push production even further down the line, to smaller subcontractors, until the original maker has little connection to the process and no ability to oversee quality or working conditions. With each step, those conditions deteriorate further.

Often, local government officials are not just on the payroll, but own shares in the local companies where dangerous conditions prevail. We might expect that those officials would be cautious, given their reputations are on the line; instead, the lack of government protection for workers remains at least as lax as it is in other factories. Sometimes, conditions are considerably worse, since the management feels safe from prosecution. By purchasing these products, we reward and perpetuate abusive working conditions.

More than 2,600 people “officially” died in Chinese coal mining accidents in 2009. Fires, floods, gas, electrical accidents—the causes ran the gambit—but the reason, across the board, was serious worker safety issues. The actual numbers are probably much higher, as many mines operate without an official license. Buying products created



under these conditions is neither ethical nor consistent with concerns about worker safety and the value of human life.

**9. JOBS SHIPPED ABROAD ALMOST NEVER RETURN. WHEN YOU BUY GOODS MADE IN THE USA, YOU HELP KEEP THE AMERICAN ECONOMY GROWING.**

Previous recessions meant factories slowed down to one shift, or even briefly stood idle; but now these factories are disappearing by the thousands, and are not coming back. The difference between cutting back and closing is critical: Once a factory closes completely, it rarely reopens. The machinery is typically shipped overseas or scrapped, leaving local economies devastated. It is very hard for a community to regrow its local economy. When a large number of skilled positions are eliminated in an area, the skill base of the former employees starts to fade almost immediately, and valuable skill sets are lost forever.

For example, one of the major factors in our victory in World War II was our ability to build and transport a massive volume of materials and weapons. The “Liberty Ships,” with the capacity to carry more than 10,000 tons at a range of 23,000 miles, made that possible. Eighteen shipyards around our nation built more than 2,700 of these ships in four years, a phenomenal display of industrial aptitude, power, and gumption, which our enemies could not hope to match.<sup>1</sup> Those shipyards are mostly closed today, and the skilled workers long gone.

Today’s unemployed are spending not weeks or even months, but years between jobs. Skills rust, new technology renders them obsolete, and the once-skilled laborer must essentially start from scratch. Most of them were good employees who worked hard and did nothing wrong, but their specialized skills that once were valuable to the manufacturer often do not translate to qualification for available jobs. The ability to make advanced tooling carries no weight when the only job opening is “Wal-Mart greeter.” Likewise, Wal-Mart and other companies of its ilk do not teach skills that prepare employees for the kind of work America needs.

When a factory closes, the emotional and financial toll it takes on displaced employees and their families is compounded by the heavy impact it has on the community. High levels of unemployment lead to an increase in foreclosure rates, lowering property values and

creating dangerous pockets where many homes are vacant. The decreased purchasing power of local residents directly affects the sustainability of local businesses, whose closing in turn triggers even higher unemployment rates. As serious as this consequence has been in isolated communities in the past, the worst has yet to come. As economic conditions continue to worsen, and more manufacturers are either driven out of business or opt to ship operations overseas, the devastation we have seen in isolated communities will spread to impact states, regions, even the country as a whole.

**8. U.S. MANUFACTURING PROCESSES ARE MUCH CLEANER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT THAN THOSE IN MANY OTHER COUNTRIES; MANY BRANDS SOLD HERE ARE PRODUCED IN COUNTRIES USING DANGEROUS, HEAVILY POLLUTING PROCESSES. WHEN YOU PURCHASE AMERICAN-MADE PRODUCTS, YOU KNOW THAT YOU'RE HELPING TO KEEP THE WORLD A LITTLE CLEANER FOR YOUR CHILDREN.**

Moving production abroad nearly always means a significant increase in pollutants being released into the environment. Manufacturers in the USA are subject to environmental regulation, and meeting or exceeding those requirements is a primary cost of doing business. Due to much looser standards—not to mention the ease of bribing local government officials—manufacturers in countries like China are able to produce the same items more cheaply, while producing and releasing more pollution. I saw appalling amounts of pollution spewing into the air and water in China. Walking the capital, I was shocked to see after blowing my nose that the tissue was black with what looked like soot.

The maker saves the short-term cost of protecting the environment, while ignoring the price the polluting nation and the rest of the world will pay in the long term. Many Americans pay lip service to environmental concerns, but there is no point in pretending we care about the environment if we continue to buy products from heavy-polluting nations. If a person really cares about nature and the environment, he or she should buy from nations that enforce pollution controls at least as strict as those in this country.

Additionally, the pollution caused just from transporting those cheap goods across the ocean is huge. According to *The Guardian*,<sup>2</sup>

just 15 of those enormous cargo container ships produce as much pollution as all the cars in the world. Transportation of goods within the United States is regulated heavily for pollution emissions, whereas the lack of standards in overseas transit means these vessels use the cheapest, dirtiest fuel available, spewing 2,000 times the level of sulfur and other pollutants. This is not just an environmental tragedy; it's also a ridiculous, unfair cost advantage over our domestic manufacturers.

**7. MANY COUNTRIES HAVE NO MINIMUM WAGE RESTRICTIONS, OR THE MINIMUM WAGE IS OUTRAGEOUSLY LOW. WHEN YOU CHOOSE PRODUCTS MADE IN THE USA, YOU CONTRIBUTE TO THE PAYMENT OF AN HONEST DAY'S WAGES FOR AN HONEST DAY'S WORK.**

Another key reason some goods made abroad are cheaper than those produced here is that the wages paid in some nations are barely above subsistence level—or even below. Even if there is a minimum wage, many companies ignore it or find ways to get around it. For example, lingerie factories have appeared along the border shared by Thailand and Myanmar (aka: Burma), to take advantage of the influx of political and economic refugees. The makers there hire mostly desperate women at very low wages, and even force them to pay a significant portion of their income as rent, to live in so-called company dormitories.

Subcontracting, a system of using less formal producers, taking work from bigger companies in these nations, results in even more serious wage abuse. Production is farmed out as piecemeal work, such as sewing a thousand shirts per week per household, and it leads to an effective pay rate well below minimum wage, and even child labor abuses in some places.

This sort of drastically low wage is vital for the chain stores that sell disposable goods at “low, low” prices. Sadly, women working in horrid conditions in the Thai jungle, producing hundreds of millions of bras and panties, are often turning out products sold so cheaply that many buyers here think nothing of dropping them in the garbage at the first sign of wear.

We are taught to believe that this constitutes “development” in those nations, but the lack of sustainable jobs created in the long run

argues against that point. These facilities are not even permanent. As this source of cheap labor dries up, the equipment is moved to the next hot spot.

**6. THE GROWING LACK OF U.S. CAPABILITY TO MANUFACTURE MANY PRODUCTS IS STRATEGICALLY UNSOUND. WHEN YOU SEEK OUT AMERICAN-MADE GOODS, YOU FOSTER AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.**

During World War II, the battle for Midway was the turning point of the war against Imperial Japan. We lost the aircraft carrier Yorktown, but the Japanese lost four major aircraft carriers—a blow they were never able to recover from. That's old news to many history buffs, but do you know how many new aircraft carriers each country added after Midway? Japan was able to add only six for the rest of the war. The USA? *Seventeen* major fleet aircraft carriers were produced and sent to the Pacific alone, with others going to Europe.<sup>3</sup> We outproduced the Japanese more than three to one. That enabled us to take the war to their homeland in just a few years. Could we do that today? Do we have the skills, shipyards, tooling, steel, and the rest? We would be very hard-pressed to meet the supply needs of an extended war against a “real” power. We have our hands full with little Afghanistan.

To make matters worse, modern weapon systems require components that we are not even making. Microprocessors, advanced materials, and electronic components must be imported.

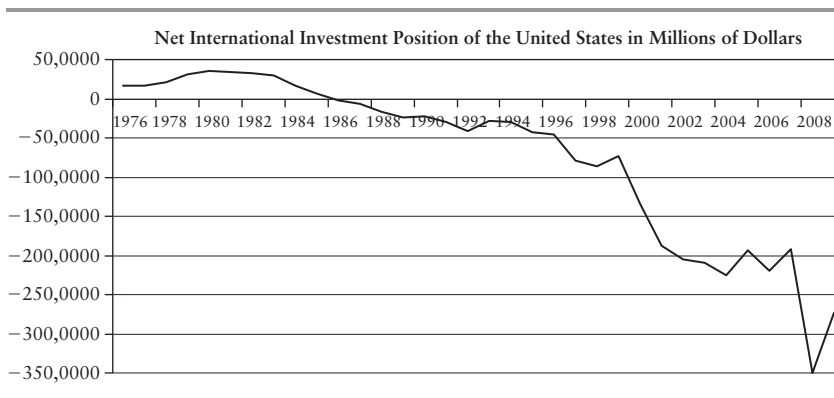
It is strategically unsound for a great power to be unable to produce what it needs to defend itself. History shows that this inability is a sure sign of decline. The Spanish and Roman empires both hollowed out after losing their ability to produce necessities domestically. What took centuries to die out in those declining empires, however, we have managed to give away in just a couple of decades.

One thing is certain in history: It always repeats. The names and faces are different, but the cycles of peace and war, feast and famine, justice and darkness always rerun. To believe that we will not face another power someday, one that is 10 times stronger than Iraq and Afghanistan combined, is to be as ignorant of human history as one is optimistic.

It is critical that we are ready to face such a challenge. In fact, being ready is the ultimate deterrent. No bully wants to get his butt kicked. He smells weakness and goes after those less able to defend themselves. Not long ago, it would have been beyond our imagination that the United States would be a country that smelled of weakness. But being ready means having an industrial base in place so that we can make what we need to defend ourselves, and then to take the fight to the enemy and win. That base is not firmly in place today, and the situation is steadily worsening. Reliance on other countries, particularly those that do not share our beliefs, is precisely the kind of weakness that attracts the bully.

#### **5. THE HUGE U.S. TRADE DEFICIT LEADS TO MASSIVE, UNSUSTAINABLE BORROWING FROM OTHER COUNTRIES. DEBT ISN'T GOOD FOR YOU AND IT ISN'T GOOD FOR AMERICA.**

Our trade deficit has drained more than \$9 trillion dollars from the USA between 1974 and 2009.<sup>4</sup> Within the same time frame, our federal budget deficit has increased from \$4 trillion to \$12 trillion. That's no coincidence. Other nations protect their trade surpluses because they understand the positive economic effect of manufacturing. That puts them in the position of strength, able to loan our money back to us. We have turned into the world's debtor nation (see Figure 1.5).



**FIGURE 1.5 The USA Becomes a Debtor Nation**

*Data Source:* Bureau of Economic Analysis.

A dollar of manufacturing activity is, in fact, worth more than a dollar. Not only the company's employees, but also their suppliers, the suppliers' employees, and many others in the chain of production and transportation benefit. That creates a multiplier effect: \$1.00 in manufacturing activity here is actually worth \$1.70, when the activity of suppliers and all other support is added in. As if the \$10 trillion trade deficit weren't serious enough, the deficit actually means that the USA lost out on \$17 trillion in economic activity. At least 40 percent of that \$17 trillion would have been collected at some point as tax revenue in the country where items are manufactured. That means nearly \$7 trillion of tax revenue has been lost in that 35-year period because we did not produce items here. Of the \$8 trillion federal budget deficit in those 35 years, \$7 trillion, or 87 percent, could have been naturally covered by increased economic activity if we had just had balanced trade.

What would that \$7 trillion have meant to the USA? As we pay about 4 percent interest on that debt, that \$7 trillion means about \$280 billion in extra interest we have to pay on the federal budget deficit every year! That is an extra \$1,000-plus in interest payments alone for every man, woman, and child in this country—and that doesn't even take into account the impact of compound interest. This paralyzing debt has become a severe burden on our economy and way of life. Imagine how much richer we would be today as a people and a nation if the trade deficit had never been allowed to grow like that!

China, Korea, Japan, and to a lesser degree, Germany, treat the United States like a surplus export dumping ground. No other nation or group of nations would have been able to absorb so many imports for so long. But even a country as large and once-wealthy as ours has limits. Japan and China talk about exporting to each other, but what they're talking about is components, many of which are being reexported to the USA. They look out for their own interests first, driving their economies through exports to the USA, then turning around and loaning our money back to us. Mathematically, these trade and budget deficits cannot continue much longer.

It was not invasion of the homeland that signaled the Spanish Empire's collapse in the seventeenth century. It was financial ruin caused by its inability to pay its debts. Today, the United States is teetering dangerously near to that same position.

**4. FOREIGN PRODUCT SAFETY STANDARDS ARE LOW. FOR EXAMPLE, POISONOUS LEVELS OF LEAD ARE IN TENS OF MILLIONS OF TOYS SHIPPED TO THIS COUNTRY. WHEN YOU BUY TOYS AND OTHER GOODS MADE IN THE USA, YOU CAN BE CONFIDENT THAT AMERICAN CONSUMER PROTECTION LAWS AND SAFETY STANDARDS ARE IN PLACE TO PROTECT YOUR FAMILY.**

In 2007, toy manufacturer Mattel recalled tens of millions of toys due to the presence of dangerous levels of lead. All of those toys were made outside the USA, the vast majority in China. So great is the dependence of some American companies on cheap overseas labor, however, that although the Chinese manufacturers were responsible for the toxins, still today tens of millions of toys are imported from China. Since the 2007 toy recall, there have been more problems with dangerous chemicals, in imported food (both for humans and animals), drywall, and again in toys.

If an unsafe item is made in the USA, the maker may face lawsuits or even go to jail. Recourse is less clear when imported products prove dangerous. In the case of Chinese-produced drywall, for example, folks who either bought homes or had remodeling done between 2006 and 2008 are coping with dangerous levels of hydrogen sulfide so high that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is recommending the drywall be torn out.<sup>5</sup> The damage and health costs are significant, and U.S. drywall makers would have been liable had they created the dangerous materials. But the manufacturers of these poisonous materials are out of reach. Nearly all those whose homes were contaminated by Chinese drywall are unable to get those Chinese companies into court, much less successfully prosecute claims against them.

No one is checking the cargo containers that come in through our ports for dangerous products or chemicals, and hundreds of thousands come through each day. It's difficult to understand what could be more important to our own government than the health and safety of its citizens, yet we see little or no action on the issue. Not only is this a real threat to our children's health, but ironically, it also puts domestic manufacturers at an extreme cost disadvantage. Since foreign producers are not held to the same standards, their cost of production is substantially lower.

Imports must be safe to be allowed into our nation. They must at the very least meet our own standards. This grievous situation must

be addressed. Yet our own behaviors and those of our corporations and even our government perpetuate the benefits of producing goods cheaply and without safety standards. Only when we stop purchasing dangerous goods from overseas will we be able to have confidence in the quality of the goods we bring into our homes. We may hope that our government will intervene and encourage that change; we may hope that corporate America will step up and stop purchasing these faulty goods, and we may call on them to do so. In the end, though, there's just one piece of the process that's wholly within our control, right now: We don't have to buy those questionable goods.

**3. LACK OF MINIMUM WAGE, WORKER SAFETY, OR ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION CONTROLS IN MANY COUNTRIES UNDERMINES THE CONCEPT OF "FAIR AND FREE TRADE." NO WESTERN NATION CAN ULTIMATELY COMPETE ON PRICE WITH A COUNTRY WILLING TO EXPLOIT ITS OWN PEOPLE AND POLLUTE ITS OWN ENVIRONMENT ON A MASSIVE SCOPE. WHEN YOU BUY ONLY AMERICAN-MADE PRODUCTS, YOU INSIST ON A HIGHER STANDARD.**

Our government sets a minimum wage for our workers, and apparently expects other governments to do their share for their own people. But what if those foreign countries don't?

I've already discussed the fact that many nations are perfectly willing to exploit their people and use the police to keep a lid on trouble; we have seen the impact that exploitation has on the quality of life for those workers and in those countries. The minimum wage is \$0.29 per hour in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> And that's a best-case scenario; in practice, even those low minimums often are not enforced. Additionally, a much larger portion of the workforce is working for minimum wage in those nations. The disparity between our nations is dramatic. A U.S.-based company paying a minimum of \$7.25/hour has a hard time competing with a company based in Vietnam paying just over 4 percent. The U.S.-based company providing a sustainable living for its employees will always have a higher cost of production than those of foreign companies, and that's without factoring in the additional costs associated with environmental regulation and worker safety. We need to consider a worldwide minimum wage, one that is likely



well below our USA standard today, but ensures some level of basic living standard in other countries.

The standards that determine which countries we'll buy from are difficult to understand. The concept of "free and fair trade" does not address these unfair cost advantages, particularly when power exporter nations are determined to take business and jobs and absorb factories on almost any terms.

**2. FACTORIES AND MONEY ARE SHIFTING TO COUNTRIES NOT FRIENDLY TO THE USA OR DEMOCRACY. WHEN YOU AVOID IMPORTED GOODS IN FAVOR OF AMERICAN-MADE ITEMS, YOU HELP ENSURE THAT THE UNITED STATES DOESN'T FIND ITS ACCESS TO VITAL GOODS HINDERED BY POLITICAL CONFLICT.**

China, Vietnam, and particularly the oil exporters Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Venezuela stand against democracy and world freedom. By allowing our factories to move to these nations, and by indulging our addiction to foreign oil, we are abandoning our ability to produce; instead, we are handing it over to nations that could turn against us in the future. The continued reduction (or even disappearance) of manufacturing power in the United States could leave us entirely dependent on nations we know we cannot rely on. How will we continue to be the "arsenal of freedom," as we were in World War I and World War II?

Slowly but surely, foreign governments are moving into a position to dictate terms to us, particularly in Washington, due to our national debt. Imagine the position the USA will be in when the next world crisis arises. If China were to attack Taiwan five years from now, would our leaders be in any position to stand up and object?

We have a lot of antiquated military equipment left over from the Cold War that has helped us deal with recent small wars. The last B-52 was produced by Boeing in 1962,<sup>7</sup> but it is still the backbone of our bomber fleet. Surely, there is a limit to the number of years and the number of wars through which this outdated equipment can sustain us. When we reach that limit, we may be in for a rude awakening.

Whether we need electronics—which are already being manufactured abroad almost exclusively—or some sort of synthetic materials to absorb radar waves, or really good, inexpensive body armor, or

some state-of-the-art technology we haven't yet imagined, we will not be able to produce it without factories.

**1. AS U.S. MANUFACTURING CAPABILITY FADES, FUTURE GENERATIONS OF U.S. CITIZENS WILL BE UNABLE TO FIND RELEVANT JOBS. BUY AMERICAN AND HELP KEEP YOUR FRIENDS, FAMILY, AND NEIGHBORS, AND EVEN YOURSELF, EARNING A LIVING WAGE.**

One of the widest cracks in the foundation of our way of life is the employment crisis Americans face. Already, it is obvious that under the present circumstances we are unable to fully employ our people, much less help them to find relevant work. Make-work government jobs and stimulus welfare checks help an individual feed his or her family on a given day, but do nothing for his or her long-term prospects. More and more frequently I hear about people who have been unemployed for six months, a year, even going on two years. Multi-year unemployment is becoming frighteningly common. As savings, skills, and prospects fade, these folks eventually limp into jobs that pay a fraction of what they were making. These are not strangers anymore, and we can no longer pretend that it couldn't happen to us. We all know good people experiencing this fate. Some of us are undoubtedly among them.

An acquaintance with 40 years of work experience recently took a job at Wal-Mart, where he is making slightly more than minimum wage, because he could not find anything else. When a customer dented his car with a shopping cart, Wal-Mart told him that it was his problem. Another man I know, college educated, is delivering pizzas; a third is a real estate agent with no customers and a negative income. These aren't people who are unwilling to work, or who want to pick and choose; they're people just like you who are doing what they have to do to support themselves and their families, yet continuing to fall further behind.

What will tomorrow bring if even more factories close? The generation now moving through school and recent graduates face the worst job prospects since the Great Depression—not just for a year or two, but potentially for decades. It is unclear where the good jobs of the future will come from. Once upon a time, government jobs were the reliable fallback, but many city governments are already facing

insolvency. State governments, and even our federal government, will soon face an increasingly dire financial situation. Governments can only raise money through taxes, printing, or borrowing, and all of these alternatives are becoming more and more limited. With pension benefits and basic services already at risk at some levels, few governmental entities will be in a position to create new jobs.

Our future is hazy. It's difficult to imagine what the next generation of Americans will do for a living, how they will find relevant work, let alone how they will establish the emotional stake in our way of life that makes true citizens. We are all letting them down: politicians, business leaders, and fellow citizens who choose low prices and convenience over American-made products. It's time we changed that. Each of these issues is a crack in the dam, and what was once "the American way of life" is already leaking away.

The good news is we still have time to act and really make a difference, if we commit ourselves to doing so. Yes, the cost in time and effort to remake the USA is high, but the financial and human cost of continued decay is much higher. This is not a TV episode or movie with a quick solution. There is no happy ending, unless we stand up and make real change happen—not over days, but years. Hope motivates, but doing is the key to achieving.

The choices we make today are critical to our future; critical to that worker who has been unemployed for two years; critical to the mother trying to feed her young kids; critical to the nurse visiting an aged retiree and wondering whether she will be paid; critical to that retiree wondering whether her pension is really safe. . . . Most of all it is critical to our nation's health as a whole. These issues will fester and become disastrous if sustainable solutions are not found and implemented.

We can continue to take the easy way for the moment. We can purchase the least expensive goods at the most convenient location without thinking about where those goods came from, what kind of toxins they might contain, at what cost to the environment they were manufactured, whether the person who assembled them was driven to suicide by the pressures of a pennies-per-day job, or what impact our decisions will have on the future of U.S. independence. Or we can once again become a nation where the sky is the limit; where ability and hard work matter; where jobs are restored, manufacturing

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retooled, and we are again able to compete with the world. We can live in a country where our children achieve far more than we ever dreamed; where foreign nations try not to attack us, but to emulate our freedoms and way of life; and where we lead as individuals and as a nation to a future of greatness, not decline.

It's in your hands. Which is it going to be?