

**UNDER THE
MICROSCOPE**

A closer look at the beliefs and views of a few 'typical' Minnesotans.



THINKING MINNESOTA



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WINTER 2024
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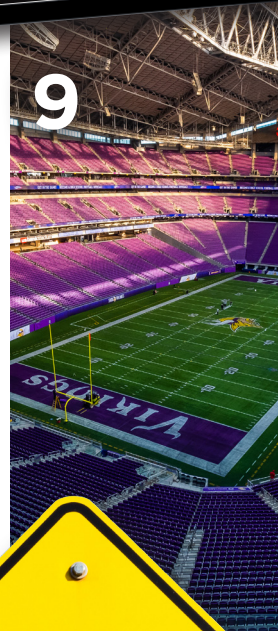
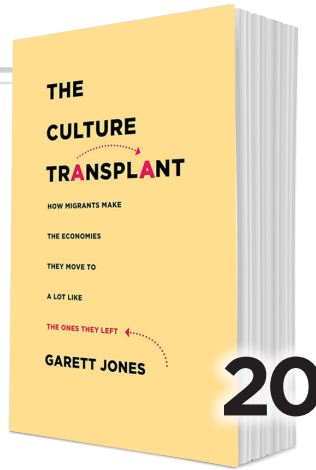
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‘AIN’T SO COMMON’

The importance of common sense to a properly functioning society.

“Common sense ain’t so common.” Mark Twain’s comment is as relevant today as when he first wrote it 150 years ago. Maybe more so. He would have been dumbstruck (as I am) at how today’s American leaders have abandoned common sense to help them “manage” government, business, and academia. This is especially true in Minnesota.

Let’s begin with our state’s recently passed operating budget. Prior to last year’s legislative session, Minnesota

It doesn’t take an economist to realize that a 33 percent budget increase in state spending is out of control. Commonsense Minnesotans all expect the proverbial manure to hit the fan.

taxpayers provided our elected leaders with an \$18 billion surplus — a 32 percent cushion over anticipated operating expenses. Such an unprecedented surplus should have provided legislators an easy path to fashion a responsible budget, right? Not with the occupants of the political clown car that currently oversee our state. The DFL governor, the DFL Senate, and the DFL House abandoned any sense of common sense as they squandered the entire surplus to pay for an agenda of frivolous “feel-good” proposals that



Ron Eibensteiner

mostly catered to left-wing political interest groups. Along the way, they boosted taxes by \$9 billion and increased the operating budget for future years by over 33 percent! It surprised no one that they excluded commonsense legislators who were trying to warn them that this spending was unsustainable.

Gov. Tim Walz and his minions assured Minnesotans not to worry about future deficits, even as the state’s non-partisan bean counters were projecting a structural deficit in the next biennium of \$2.3 billion (or substantially more, if the economy slows down or slips into a recession). Walz responded with a cavalier smirk, saying, “We can always increase taxes if we have to.” It doesn’t take an economist to realize that a 33 percent budget increase in state spending is out

of control. Commonsense Minnesotans all expect the proverbial manure to hit the fan.

Now, as the ghost town formerly known as downtown Minneapolis continues its desultory slide into economic and cultural irrelevance, a group of political, business, and community do-gooders convened to brainstorm how to make downtown Minneapolis a more desirable destination for visitors, employees, and residents. Their comically ludicrous list of proposals included turning the Nicollet Mall into a pedestrian-only walkway, expanding the city’s farmers market, hosting more outdoor events and festivals, and allowing people to openly consume alcoholic beverages on the streets.

Actual visitors, employees, and residents — the commonsense folks — would have told them to forget the frivolity and focus solely on public safety. People stay away from downtown Minneapolis because they don’t feel safe. Our own *Thinking Minnesota* Poll discovered in May 2023 that an overwhelming 77 percent of Minnesotans were concerned about crime in our urban core.

Nothing will improve the attractiveness of Minneapolis until our feckless public officials and our spineless business leaders call for more police and prosecution of criminals. People want to feel safe when visiting downtown. Pretty basic stuff.

Common sense is also embarrassingly absent from any discussions of our light rail transit system. Members of the Met Council, which oversees light rail, would benefit from Yogi Berra’s advice, who once said, “You can observe a lot by watching.” Simply based on my

casual observation, both the Blue and Green Lines are largely empty of any commuters, except for the homeless and drug dealers. Why? Might it be due to safety concerns? Maybe we simply misjudged the need for having such a system. Light rail has devolved into a gigantic, excessively expensive boondoggle. It would be cheaper to give riders a monthly Uber voucher.

Despite this, the heedless members of the Met Council are plowing ahead with the Southwest Light Rail corridor, saddling taxpayers with a bill of \$3 billion from the initial estimate of approximately \$1 billion. They also want to construct the even costlier Bottineau line. Common sense would dictate that when construction expenses are out of control and ridership on the two current lines is at an all-time low, maybe, just maybe, we should put everything on pause before we spend more taxpayer money and prevent this transportation disaster from getting even bigger.

Minnesota's K-12 education policies are even more nonsensical. Commonsense parents aren't surprised that only 34.8 percent of Minneapolis public school students can perform at grade-level in math and 41.2 percent proficiency in reading. Students are experiencing historically low test scores because school leaders prioritize social activism over academic performance. Pumping more money into the existing system and getting the same dismal results year after year will only fail another generation of young people. It is not the answer and should not be allowed to happen.

Parents are looking for better educational alternatives. They are looking for more emphasis on basic *education*: reading, writing, and arithmetic. They aren't impressed by pouring money into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, growing the number of non-teaching bureaucrats who are overwhelming school budgets, and turning schools into cultural flashpoints

such as putting feminine hygiene products in boys' bathrooms.

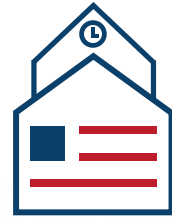
The commonsense response would be to embrace basic knowledge and learning and make school choice initiatives widely available. An effective solution might be for students from low-income families and underserved children of color or those with special needs to be given a chance to attend a school of their choice — whether public or private.

How do we get back on track? It requires ordinary people to push back

American Experiment isn't just the state's smartest, most conservative and impactful think tank, **we're Minnesota's commonsense think tank.**

on these nonsensical leaders and call them out as total frauds. Commonsense advocates should not lose heart when we're flooded with daily nonsense from our leaders. We must band together and speak out. We must start electing people who are not influenced by the latest fads but rather can judge for themselves what makes sense and what doesn't.

We at American Experiment strive every day to find fact-based public policy solutions rooted in common sense. We don't bend in the breeze of "feel-good" new-age trends and bumper sticker slogans. We have assembled a library of well-researched policy recommendations grounded in reality and time-tested, commonsense truths. American Experiment isn't just the state's smartest, most conservative and impactful think tank, we're Minnesota's *commonsense* think tank. And we will continue to fight for commonsense solutions to our most vexing social and economic problems in the coming years. ★



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**THINKING
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Gratitude

> You are actually a “gift” from our daughter, Amy Hanson. She ordered this wonderful magazine for herself, but somehow her subscription ended up coming to us. We’ve enjoyed *Thinking Minnesota* for a few years now. Thank you; it gives us hope for Minnesota.

My daughter ended up moving to North Dakota for a new job. Sadly, she was diagnosed with cancer on her birthday in May 2022, and in Feb. 2023, she was healed, but not on this side of heaven. We miss our daughter with every heartbeat. Every time your magazine comes to us in Amy’s name, it feels like a gift from her.

Your latest *Thinking Minnesota* came and you wanted to know if Amy still wanted to continue with her subscription. Amy cannot respond to your question, but we’d love to continue in her honor.

Mr. and Mrs. Hanson

Film review

> I would highly recommend that the staff of *Thinking Minnesota* view the documentary, “The Fall of Minneapolis.” It is on YouTube. It would be good if it were mentioned in the magazine.

Eugene O. Nelson

A matter of fact

> I read [John Phelan’s] piece on the decline of population over the past year in the state of Minnesota. How sure are you about the conclusion you made as to the cause of the decline? Did you consider any other possible explanation for this trend? Your conclusion seems a bit simplistic don’t you think?

How many people move from one place to another based on the politics of the governor? Or the current political climate in the state for that matter?

It would appear that you have mistaken correlation for causation. In my opinion, the data does not support your conclusion. If you have additional information to support your

conclusion, I would be interested to hear your thoughts.

It is unethical to use facts to manipulate the uneducated.

Jonathan Heinrichs

> John Phelan responds:

Thank you for your correspondence.

First, you are incorrect; I said nothing about Minnesota’s population declining. I wrote that net domestic migration was negative, which is not the same thing. I made this point explicitly.

As to the cause, yes, I have considered other causes. I have, in fact, written that “taxes are not the only factor which drives people’s decisions over where to live and work ... and a recent

**Every time your
magazine comes to
us in Amy’s name,
it feels like a
gift from her.**

paper by economists Henrik Kleven, Camille Landais, Mathilde Muñoz, and Stefanie Stantcheva review[s] a growing empirical literature on the effects of personal taxation on the geographic mobility of people and discuss[es] its policy implications” finding,

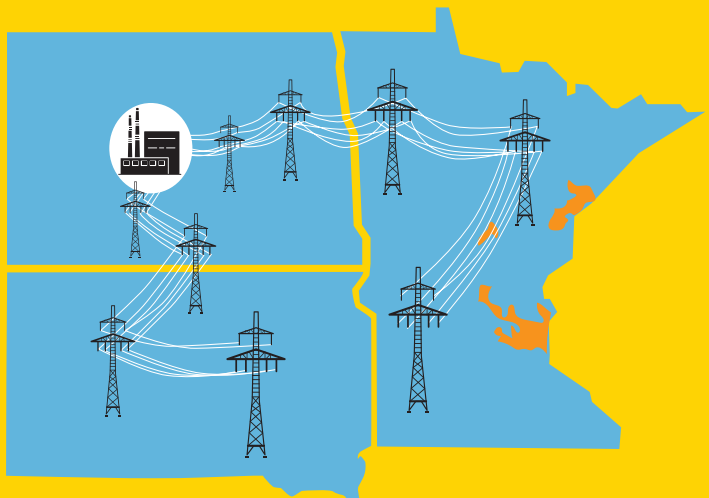
There is growing evidence that taxes can affect the geographic location of people both within and across countries. This migration channel creates another efficiency cost of taxation with which policymakers need to contend when setting tax policy.

More specifically:

This body of work has shown that certain segments of the labor market, especially high-income workers and professions with little location-specific human capital, may be quite responsive to taxes in their location decisions.

John Phelan

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Sometimes, it has been that of honored guests and world leaders such as George Will, Benjamin Netanyahu, Margaret Thatcher, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and Mike Pompeo.

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UP FRONT



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Longtime Suffering

THE ECONOMICS OF SPORTS

Can the Vikings' persistent woes be traced back to bad economic policies?

The Minnesota Vikings' season was effectively over before my Christmas tree came down. The state's sports journalists are donning their gloves and sharpening their scalpels, preparing to conduct the annual autopsy. The Vikings suffered from some negative exogenous shocks, to be sure, primarily the loss of quarterback Kirk Cousins. But such persistent failure suggests a persistent malady. Two pieces of research suggest that the Gopher State's high taxes might be a factor.

In his 2018 paper, "Touchdowns, Sacks and Income Tax – How the Taxman decides who wins the Super Bowl," economist Matthias Petutschnig looked at data for a 23-year period from 1994 to 2016 and found "a significant negative relation between the amount of the net (after-tax) salary cap represented by the personal income tax rate of the teams' home states

and the success of the teams."

Why would tax rates matter for results? The NFL's salary cap limits what each team can spend on players' salaries. The cap is \$225 million this season, an average of \$4.2 million per player for a 53-man roster.

That's just gross pay; it doesn't take state income taxes into account. In higher-tax states like Minnesota, a greater share of that gross income is swallowed up by state taxes than in a lower-tax state like Florida. So, to offer the same *net* pay as a Florida team, a Minnesota team must offer higher *gross* pay. But that comes out of the \$225 million cap, reducing the amount available to attract other players: "This reduces the average talent level of the whole roster of a team in a high tax state and diminishes its chances of winning," Petutschnig says.

Another 2018 paper supports this

finding. "State Income Taxes and Team Performance: Do Teams Bear the Burden?" by economist Erik Hembre investigates "the effect of income tax rates on professional team performance using data from professional baseball, basketball, football, and hockey leagues." He writes, "Regressing income tax rates on winning percentage between 1995 and 2017, I find robust evidence of a negative income tax effect on team performance."

Three points lend strength to Hembre's findings. First, looking at college games — where the athletes are unpaid — we would expect to find this effect absent and, indeed, Hembre finds that college teams in low-tax states performed no better than college teams in high-tax states. Second, of the leagues investigated, teams' results were the *least* correlated with their states' tax rates in baseball. This, again, is what you would expect: There is no limit on the salaries MLB teams can pay their players, so baseball franchises in high-tax states don't face the constraint of a salary cap. Third, when Hembre pushed the analysis back to 1977, he finds that "the income tax effect only arose after players gained unrestricted free agency, allowing them to shift the income tax burden on to teams."

We know anecdotally that taxes are a factor in the location decisions of top players, as was the case for (former) Boston Celtics forward Grant Williams who eventually signed with the Dallas Mavericks as well as wide receiver Tyreek Hill's move to the Miami Dolphins despite a lucrative offer from the New York Jets in 2022. The evidence presented in these two papers seems to bear that out. Sadly, given the state government's \$10 billion tax hike in the most recent legislative session, the legendary suffering of Minnesota's sports fans looks set to continue. ★

—John Phelan



Allie Howell, UMLC's new trial and appellate counsel.

New Lawyer on the Block

UMLC adds to its team fighting for freedom and constitutional rights in Minnesota.

When Allie Howell left the University of Notre Dame's law school in 2021, she knew she wanted to work at a public interest firm taking on conservative, pro-freedom cases. But she never thought it would happen as soon as it did. Just over a year after graduating at the top of her class, in September 2023, Howell accepted a position as the Upper Midwest Law Center's (UMLC) new trial and appellate counsel.

"Everyone wants to do litigation about the Constitution, so openings in that area are few and far between. I always assumed I would have to go to a bigger firm for a few years and do standard litigation until an opportunity opened up. I was really blessed that UMLC was looking to expand and that I got in touch

when I did," says Howell.

Originally from Michigan, Howell earned her undergraduate degree in economics and mathematics from Hillsdale College, where she was active in a number of student groups and interned with both the Manhattan Institute and Reason Magazine. These experiences gave her a chance to connect firsthand with small business owners and were instrumental, she says, in showing her "how much harm bad government policy can do."

The first half of Howell's time at the University of Notre Dame was relatively traditional — she studied, interned with the Institute for Justice, and joined the Federalist Society, a group of conservative, libertarian, and moderate law students that promotes

open discussion of legal issues. But during her second year, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, sending students home until the fall of 2020. Howell returned to campus for her third and final year, but the pandemic restrictions on campus "made it basically impossible to ever interact with another person."

After finishing her degree in the spring of 2021, Howell embarked on the first stage of her career: judicial clerkships. She spent two years clerking, first on the Seventh Circuit in Milwaukee and then on the Eighth Circuit in Minneapolis. She saw cases ranging from intellectual property rights and contract disputes to criminal appeals, and enjoyed the inside perspective on how decisions are made. But Howell had decided early on to use her degree for a meaningful purpose. Too many lawyers, she says, benefit financially from a complex legal system that is intentionally difficult for the average citizen to navigate.

"There are many lawyers who do more harm than good," says Howell. "Laws are often written by lawyers, for lawyers, and that makes it really hard for everyday people to do business and to protect and safeguard their property and constitutional rights."

With this in mind, Howell started researching public interest law firms in Minnesota. She wasn't tied to Minneapolis when she began her judicial clerkship — in fact, she had accepted the position before ever visiting the city — but now she wanted to stay in the area, if possible. Luckily, UMLC was looking to expand.

"We're delighted to welcome Alexandra to UMLC," says Doug Seaton, president and founder of the organization. "Her passion for defending constitutional freedoms and unwavering commitment to justice align perfectly with our mission... her expertise and enthusiasm will strengthen our team and the impact we make."

Since joining UMLC in early Sep-

tember, Howell has already worked on several prominent cases, most recently the “Don’t Say Felon” case (which was highlighted in the last issue of *Thinking Minnesota*).

“UMLC is very busy, especially right now... so there’s always a lot to do,” says Howell. “I get to see the full picture of how a case goes from start to finish, which can take years. Some of our cases were opened several years ago and there’s still work to be done on them.”

With just four attorneys on staff, UMLC is kept very busy. One of the biggest shocks for Howell was the sheer number of lawyers they go up against.

“Oftentimes with our work, you’ll see

“Laws are often written by lawyers, for lawyers, and that makes it really hard for everyday people to do business and to protect and safeguard their property and constitutional rights.”

—UMLC lawyer Allie Howell

a small group working on a case versus a whole team of lawyers, whether it’s in the Minnesota Attorney General’s office or a private firm — a real David and Goliath story.”

In Howell’s opinion, UMLC will play a crucial role in keeping the political and ideological battle for Minnesota fair and balanced.

“I think this last legislative session and the DFL trifecta showed that liberal policies unopposed will bulldoze their way through the state. Without UMLC or similar groups, there is nothing to stop an agenda that most people find deeply unpopular and problematic.” ★

—Grace Bureau



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Film Review



The facts presented in this 97-minute documentary are undisputed **but, taken together, present a narrative 180 degrees opposite of the accepted story of George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020, and its aftermath.**

Witness to the Fall

A review of Alpha News' 'The Fall of Minneapolis.'

Viewers familiar with the current appearance of George Floyd Square at 38th and Chicago Ave. may be interested in seeing how the corner looked before its transformation into the “autonomous zone” of the self-proclaimed “Free State of George Floyd.” Almost forgotten nearly four years later is the functioning gas station across the street from the former Cup Foods.

The video opens with the warning “viewer discretion is advised.” The footage shown isn't particularly violent or graphic in depicting the death of George Floyd and the subsequent riots. What the discerning viewer needs to be prepared for is to have their faith shaken in the basic fairness of the American justice system, if not America itself.

“The Fall of Minneapolis” is a crowd-

funded production of our friends at Alpha News, and is available for free viewing on Alpha's website, Alphanews.org, and at the organization's Twitter (X) account, [@AlphaNewsMN](https://twitter.com/AlphaNewsMN). It was released on November 16, 2023.

I highly recommend its viewing. The facts presented in this 97-minute documentary are undisputed but, taken together, present a narrative 180 degrees opposite of the accepted story of George Floyd's death on May 25,

2020, and its aftermath.

Despite millions of views, the video has received almost no attention from local Minnesota media.

The video was produced by Alpha News' reporter Liz Collin, formerly with WCCO-TV news. Collin herself is married to retired Minneapolis police lieutenant and union leader Bob Kroll.

The documentary is based on Collin's book *They're Lying: The Media, the Left and the Death of George Floyd* published by Paper Birch Publishing in October 2022.

Collin conducts the interviews in the piece, most of which include individuals who were working as veteran Minneapolis police officers in May 2020, many of whom are now retired (early) from the force. She conducts the first-ever media interviews with Derek Chauvin and another police officer, both of whom were among the four Minneapolis police officers convicted in Floyd's death. She also interviews family members of the convicted officers.

Segments in the video include the May 2020 arrest of Floyd, the abandonment by the city of the 3rd Precinct police headquarters, the burning of Minneapolis in the riots, Floyd's original autopsy, Chauvin's trial, and the aftermath of those events.

The facts presented, including police bodycam footage and documents from Floyd's autopsy, were all known at the time of the incidents shown in the video, but received little media attention and were, in many instances, excluded from the trials of Chauvin and the other officers.

Police bodycam footage of Floyd's arrest takes up nearly all of the first 17 minutes of the video, with the accompanying audio from the scene. The audience is invited to draw its own conclusions from viewing the raw footage.

The rest of the feature includes Collin's interviews, and we hear from the prominent politicians involved: Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, Atty.

Gen. Keith Ellison, Gov. Tim Walz, and others, all in their own words taken from various press conferences, public appearances, and media interviews.

The principal political players — Frey, Ellison, Walz, and members of the Minneapolis city council — have all been re-elected since the events of May and June 2020, despite their gross dereliction of duty. The judge in the state

The principal political players — Frey, Ellison, Walz, and members of the Minneapolis city council — have all been re-elected since the events of May and June 2020, despite their gross dereliction of duty.

trial is still on the bench hearing cases.

We see excerpts from Chauvin's state trial, including what are suggested to be instances of perjury committed by key prosecution witnesses.

The most significant event to occur since the video's release was the Nov. 24, 2023 stabbing of Chauvin in a federal prison in Tucson, Ariz. Chauvin's assailant, who stabbed him 22 times, is reported to be an FBI informant and member of a Mexican gang. Chauvin continues to serve his prison sentence where he was attacked.

Back in Minneapolis, scars from the fires and the ruins of abandoned buildings could still be seen. The burned-out ruin of the 3rd Precinct police building sits abandoned on Lake Street surrounded by a tall fence, but otherwise untouched since the riots. "The Fall of Minneapolis" reminds us why. ★

—Bill Glahn



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Minnesota's Only Backstop to the Radical Left's Agenda



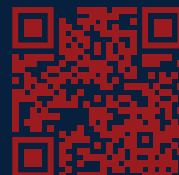
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News of Note in Minnesota

Center events, initiatives, and policy work.



Roger Frisch, former associate concertmaster with the Minnesota Orchestra, plays violin at American Experiment's Owatonna Thanksgiving party.

Events

American Experiment held several policy events following-up on the success of this summer's Off the Cliff tour. Economist John Phelan joined the Center's Duluth chapter November 9. The evening discussion, "The Economic Consequences of the DFL Trifecta," was held at Clyde Iron Works.

Education policy fellow Catrin Wigfall spoke about academic performance, new education mandates, and how educators, parents, and community members can get involved to restore excellence in schools at events on Nov. 14 at the Bigwood Event Center in Fergus Falls, and the following day at the Brookview Golf Club in Golden Valley.

The Young Leaders Council (YLC) held its annual holiday party at the Metropolitan Club in Golden Valley on December 5, co-sponsored by the Freedom Club. The sold-out event featured food, drinks, photo booth, a raffle, and live music. More information about YLC

and sponsored events can be found on our website (AmericanExperiment.org/ylc).

Greater Minnesota-Duluth

In addition to the events with Phelan and Wigfall, American Experiment's five Greater Minnesota chapters held holiday parties. A Thanksgiving celebration was held in Owatonna at Torey's Restaurant and Bar and featured Roger Frisch, former associate concertmaster with the Minnesota Orchestra. Christmas parties were held throughout December in Duluth, Perham (West Central chapter), and Mankato. The Rochester chapter's New Year's party was held on January 18 at Riverview Greens Golf Club. Speakers at the events included Kendall and Sheila Qualls, Dr. Scott Jensen, and Center economist John Phelan.

American Experiment Mankato chapter Christmas party at Swiss & Madison celebrated with chapter chair Scott Weilage and the Center's Micah Olson.

American Experiment will launch a St. Cloud chapter in 2024. Anyone interested in learning more about that effort can contact our Greater Minnesota outreach director Micah Olson at Micah.Olson@AmericanExperiment.org. Says Olson, "While 2023 was marked by growth for our Greater Minnesota project, 2024 will be a year to further our impact. With five chapters strong we will look to deepen our relationships, extend our influence, and be a beacon of a more prosperous vision for Minnesota."

Initiatives

Minnesota's new \$729 million State Office Building was nominated for the Center's annual Golden Turkey award and is the subject of the new initiative, "Stop the Dig!" The purpose is to bring awareness to this budget boondoggle and demand accountability and transparency from our state legislators. Readers can sign a petition and find information on other calls to



action on our website (AmericanExperiment.org/get-involved).

Policy work

Energy and environment policy fellows Isaac Orr and Mitch Rolling continue to produce national reports about the high cost and detrimental impact of green energy mandates.

Senior policy fellow Peter Nelson’s latest policy brief, “Minnesota’s Health Insurance Outlook for 2024” highlights the importance of reinsurance to the state’s competitive health insurance market and competitive premium pricing.

In his new report, “The X-Factor? Social capital and economic well-being: A quantitative analysis,” economist John Phelan examines the concept of social capital and any connection or impact varying levels of it has on Minnesota’s families, communi-



In his new report, “The X-Factor? Social capital and economic well-being: A quantitative analysis,” economist John Phelan examines the concept of social capital.

ties, and economic well-being.

These and any past reports and briefs can be reviewed or downloaded on our website (AmericanExperiment.org/reports).

Upcoming events

On Thursday, April 18, American Experiment is hosting a school choice expo at the Courtyard by Marriott in Mankato. Policy fellow Catrin Wigfall is the featured speaker. Attendees will be able to visit educational booths and hear from a num-

ber of local private, religious, homeschool and education support representatives. There will also be a panel discussion and Q&A. Doors open at 5:30 pm.

American Experiment’s Annual Dinner Gala will be held Thursday, June 6. Israel’s 13th Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, is the featured speaker. Bennett served as prime minister from 2021-2022 in addition to other high-ranking offices. He is the most notable and important voice on events in the Middle East since the Hamas terror attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023. For tickets to this event and information on all Center events, visit our website (AmericanExperiment.org/events). ★

SCHOOL CHOICE EXPO

Navigating Minnesota’s education system and alternatives

Courtyard by Marriott Mankato

901 Raintree Road
Mankato, MN 56001

5:30 PM Doors open and explore school options

6:30 PM Program begins

7:00 PM Panel discussion and Q&A

7:30 PM Event concludes

Thursday, **April 18**



Questions?

Email Events@AmericanExperiment.org



Schools



Kelly Hecksel, project manager; Kathy Johnson, head of school; David Reagles, dean of faculty; and Eric Else, board chair at Mankato Christian Academy high school.

Cultivating a Christian Education

A new Mankato high school is teaching students skills for tomorrow through a scripturally-grounded curriculum.

What started 20 years ago as a mustard seed planted in Eric Else's heart germinated this past August when Mankato Christian Academy (MCA) opened its doors to 9th through 12th graders.

"God placed it on my heart to start a Christian high school decades ago; however, I kept trying to stomp it down and forget about it," Else shared in an interview with American Experiment. "In December 2022, I felt God telling me now is the time. We started prayer meetings at a local church, and the momentum that followed was unbelievable. God brought some amazing people together to make MCA a reality." Else currently serves as

the board chair of MCA.

With guidance from individuals who have helped start schools across the country, including a handful here in Minnesota, and support from area churches, plans began taking root in January 2023.

"How do you start a high school?" Else recalls himself asking project manager Kelly Hecksel, who humbly responded with what would become her signature line: "I don't know the answer to that, but I know we can figure it out." To which Else said, "Yeah, how hard can it be?"

Hecksel's 10 years of experience in facility management proved invaluable

over the next several months, particularly during her oversight of remodeling projects that couldn't begin until the previous tenant vacated the building in June.

"The inside of the building was in rough shape, and the parking lot needed to be totally redone to eliminate all of the water issues," according to Else. "We had to put in some new electrical, plumbing, and completely gut several rooms."

Despite a myriad of infrastructure hurdles, the entire high school was planned out, approved, created, and ready to go in less than eight months.

Else credits school leadership and local community support for the timely accomplishment.

For the Head of School at Mankato Christian Academy Kathy Johnson, building on community connections is key. "We want to be a good steward to the community, and we want to share our

"For too long, we've told students that they have to sit in a desk and face forward, and that's how you learn."

—Eric Else, board chair of MCA

space when we can. We want to work together with the public school system, and we want to be additive to the Christian education community, networking and partnering with other Christian schools in the area."

The high school shares facility space with local homeschool families, and



Despite a myriad of infrastructure hurdles, the entire high school was planned out, approved, created, and ready to go in less than eight months.

students can register for one or two classes. The high school also opens up its gymnasium to other local private schools. Once a month, MCA students go out into the community for “Serve Day” to do some form of volunteer work. Weekly, students meet with subject matter experts, visiting their company sites and seeing them in action. It’s an opportunity to develop valuable relationships with key leaders in the area’s businesses and communities.

“It’s real-world application and hands-on learning experiences that help drive their educational journey,” says Johnson. “For example, students recently visited a fabrication company, and from that experience, a student is now interested in becoming a welder.”

And even if a student doesn’t find his or her passion in that particular setting, they develop an appreciation for the people who do those things, according to David Reagles, dean of faculty at MCA. “I think that empathy is something that our society really needs. So, for a student who never would imagine picking up a blowtorch, but by going to a fabrication facility gets to see what the people who work there do, it builds an appreciation that is healthy for maturing and becoming active members of society.”

As education continues to evolve, so too should the delivery of it, according to Else. “For too long, we’ve told students that they have to sit in a desk and face forward, and that’s how you learn. Mankato Christian Academy’s niche is through its personalized learning approach, preparing students with skills for tomorrow. Our teachers are committed to ensuring students are ready to navigate the challenges of the world as servant leaders in their communities, their state, and in their country.”

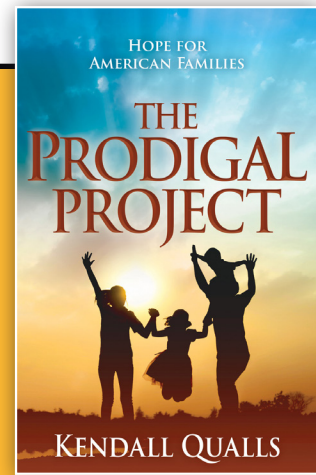
With building space for 214 students, Else and his team are hopeful for the future and look forward to taking the high school to the next level.

“Our end goal is to find 60 to 80 acres in the area to build a school campus — one with sports facilities and dedicated spaces to the trades,” says Else. “There would be an agricultural space, a construction space, a welding space. Having those dedicated areas for kids to learn and put what they are learning into practice is so important.”

As of the most recently available data, private school enrollment in Minnesota continues to increase post-COVID. ★

—Catrin Wigfall

For more information on Mankato Christian Academy, visit MankatoCA.school. On April 18, American Experiment will be hosting a school choice expo in Mankato, featuring a variety of education options in the area. Go to AmericanExperiment.org/events to learn more.



Through personal stories in *The Prodigal Project*, Kendall Qualls explains that the promise of America is available to anyone regardless of race or social status. In this book, Qualls addresses uncomfortable topics such as the crisis of fatherless homes and the silence of the church in addressing this problem as the main source of disparities, not systemic racism.

In *The Prodigal Project*, Qualls also tackles the threat of the progressive movement against the traditional nuclear family, religious faith, and the values that made the U.S. an exceptional nation.



Kendall Qualls is the president of the nonprofit organization TakeChargeMN and executive faculty of Crown College School of Business.

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KendallQualls.com



TOM STEWARD

FAST-TRACKING A SLOW RIDE

Plans to revive a failed Twin Cities-to-Duluth train service ignore history.

Those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it, so goes the saying. But what of the cabal of consultants, MnDOT bureaucrats, and political insiders resurrecting passenger train service between the Twin Cities and Duluth? Ignorance in this case might be forgivable, but to sink \$194 million in state funding for a \$775 million taxpayer-funded boondoggle, formally dubbed the Northern Lights Express (NLX), borders on malfeasance.

Anyone familiar with the failure of Amtrak's North Star line that folded on Easter 1985, and the complete lack of

Amtrak managed to plod along for a decade, despite a third-world level of service, immortalized by Smith in his column.

public groundswell or compelling case made for resuming service in the 40 years since, could mistake the plan for an early April Fool's joke.

How abysmal was the defunct Amtrak line? "It is easier to pass through the eye of a needle than to travel to Duluth by Amtrak train," legendary *Minneapolis Tribune* columnist Robert T. Smith observed in January 1979.

A loyal *Thinking Minnesota* reader, all too familiar with Northstar's history and its lessons, provided Smith's column, which was inspired by his family's



Tom Steward

excursion to Duluth.

"It was to be our son Bryan's first train trip. He's 3, and is into trains and trucks and such," Smith wrote. "It turned out to be one of those experiences that people think you made up. Sometimes even we think it couldn't have happened. But it did."

The ill-fated Twin Ports to Twin Cities line embarked in 1975. Amtrak managed to plod along for a decade, despite a third-world level of service, immortalized by Smith in his column.

"We were naïve. We had some sort of ridiculous trust that the 7:50 train would leave at 7:50," Smith continued.

"We arrived in subzero temperatures at the Midway Station, which is carefully situated so you can't find it. We

waited in line to buy tickets and were a bit worried because it was coming onto 7:50. When we reached the ticket seller (singular), he said: "Oh, did you hear? The train is four hours late today."

The Smith family trudged back to their car and the comforts of home to await the tardy train. There, "the fun really began." For a couple of hours, the columnist tried phoning the depot, only to get a busy signal. When he finally managed to get through, he was informed the train was leaving in 15 minutes.

"We rushed about and drove quickly to the depot, totally frustrated, and fearing we'd miss the train. No worry. We waited an hour and a half in the depot. About 1



Amtrak's North Star passenger train waiting at the Duluth Depot in 1981.

p.m., it finally departed."

Lynn Johnson, the reader who shared Smith's outrage column, happened to be on the same trip with *his* young family. But he says it was nothing like the trains he took growing up in New Jersey and never will be.

"Nothing has changed," Johnson says. "It's a huge amount of money, limited amount of passengers, and easily com-

Hikki Nagasaki, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

pleted with current transportation... a tragic waste of money.”

No wonder there was already talk in 1979 about shuttering the line, six years before the end mercifully came. What’s hard to believe is that anyone with a straight face would try to bring it back.

Yet the effort to revive the route has been in the works for a quarter of a century. A feasibility study done in 2000 by the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative panning the proposed service as too slow and inefficient turned out to be barely a speed bump. Behind the scenes, U.S. Representative of Minnesota’s Eighth District and powerful House Transportation Committee Chair Democrat James Oberstar cobbled together a coalition of counties to lobby for the route in St. Paul and Washington, D.C.

Even as the train’s promised speed plummeted from 110 mph to 79 mph, the project’s price tag accelerated from \$89 million in 2000 to \$320 million in 2006 to \$1 billion in 2009. Yet funding always popped up in time to keep the line on life support — such as the \$5 million in stimulus spending that surfaced four years after the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed.

“Nothing seemingly slows NLX down,” I reported at the time. “Not even a controversial 2010 *Benefit Cost Analysis* draft report that concluded the ‘Twin Cities-Duluth HSR (High Speed Rail) Corridor has a low benefit-cost ratio.’” Taxpayers would realize a return of just 27-35 cents in benefits for every government dollar spent on NLX, according to the study, which was scrubbed from MnDOT’s website.

Along the way, Anoka, Isanti, and Pine Counties pulled out of the locally unpopular project.

“Frankly, we are not willing to gamble with the taxpayers’ dollars on a passenger rail system where I believe

the studies and numbers just don’t add up,” said Rhonda Sivarajah, then Anoka County’s board chair.

Despite years of plotting and back-room deals, however, NLX faces the same nemesis as passengers past and yet to come: significant delays. Outdated design and environmental studies need updating, an agreement must be reached with BNSF, who owns the rails, and more than half a billion dollars in federal funding must flow in before

No wonder there was already talk in 1979 about shuttering the line, six years before the end mercifully came.

What’s hard to believe is that anyone with a straight face would try to bring it back.

construction work commences.

“The Northern Lights Express is nowhere near ‘shovel ready’ as is often cited,” the rail advocacy group All Aboard Minnesota recently warned. “This entire process could take anywhere from seven to 10 years we have been told.”

That would be 10 years too soon for Robert T. Smith.

“About 5 p.m., we finally reached someone at the Duluth depot. He knew the answer: The 6 o’clock train will leave on time — only it’s a bus.”

“A bus! I told my wife Janet and she thought it was one of the funniest lines I had created in years.”

More than 40 years later, the punch-line is still the same. ★

A with Sheila Qualls
ALPHANEWS

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New immigrants to the United States arrive at Ellis Island.

The Intersection of Culture and Wealth

An economist looks for the roots of prosperity in cultural norms and beliefs.

There is a large and growing body of pseudo-academic literature arguing that “if we truly believe that all humans are equal, then disparity in condition can only be the result of systemic discrimination.” Scholars working in economic growth, by contrast, find many causes for “disparity in condition,” including disparities in cultural norms. As economist Oded Galor argues in his recent book *The Journey of Humanity: The Origins of Wealth and Inequality*:

Cultural traits — the shared values, norms, beliefs and preferences that prevail in a society and are transmitted across the generations — have often made a significant impact on a society’s development process. In particular, aspects of culture that dispose popula-

tions towards or away from the maintenance of strong family ties, interpersonal trust, individualism, future orientation and investment in human capital have considerable long-term economic implications.

Some cultural norms, then, are more conducive to economic prosperity than others. But what happens when we mix cultures with different norms? That is the question Garrett Jones, an economist at George Mason University, explores in his new book *The Culture Transplant: How Migrants Make the Economies They Move To a Lot Like the Ones They Left*.

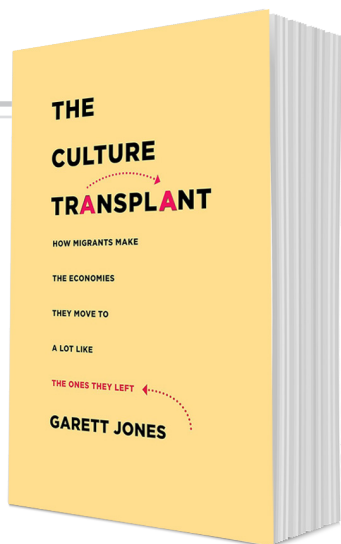
Starting with that observation, based on a huge body of empirical research — that cultural factors are indispensable in explaining differing levels of economic

well-being — Jones explains that immigrants take the norms of their home country with them and, crucially, largely retain them in their new country.

Jones includes an example with an interesting local tie. He cites a paper by economists Yann Algan and Pierre Cahuc, which asked, “Do you think most people can be trusted, or overall do you think you can’t be too careful in dealing with others?” Algan and Cahuc found that, internationally, Scandinavian countries are the most trusting, and it isn’t even close. However, they also compared the levels of trust in Sweden with those of Americans with Swedish heritage. Summarizing their findings, Jones writes:

Current trust attitudes back in the ancestral homeland did a very good job predicting trust attitudes of Americans whose ancestors came from those homelands. Forty-six percent of the home-country attitude toward trust survived, when compared against migrants whose ancestors came from other countries. People from high-trust societies pass on about half of their high-trust attitudes to their descendants, and people from low-trust societies pass on about half of their low-trust attitudes. On average, hyphenated-Americans appear to get about half of their attitudes towards trust from the land that comes before the hyphen.

But don’t their descendants assimilate so that this number falls and levels of trust converge? Apparently not, at least not in the very short term. “[L]ooking only at those fourth-generation immigrants, people whose great-great-grandparents were the most recent ancestors to live their full lives overseas,” Jones writes, Algan and Cahuc find “the same 46 percent persistence.” Overall, “average trust levels in ancestral homelands explain about half the differences in aver-



age trust levels across these different groups of hyphenated Americans.”

This is an important finding. “[T]here’s already a big scholarly literature across business, economics, and political science arguing that trust (when combined with trustworthiness) is really important for prosperity and productivity,” Jones notes. It is a key element of “social capital,” which, in American Experiment’s new report “The X-Factor? Social capital and economic well-being: A quantitative analysis,” we find is statistically significant and positively related with economic well-being, as measured by median household income. So, might one

reason for Minnesota’s above-average median household income be our above-average share of residents with Scandinavian heritage, whose ancestors brought high levels of social capital — especially trust — with them, which persists to the present day?

The final link in Jones’ chain is to argue that if, say, a large number of people with Galor’s “high-growth” norms immigrate to a country with “lower-growth” norms, this will raise the average norms in that country, making it more like the country they left, and improving its economic prospects (the process can work in reverse, as in the example he gives of

Argentina after World War I).

Here the evidence is less conclusive, the argument being based more on example and analogy than on the reams of research supporting the previous links. While it might be true that the Chinese diaspora across Southeast Asia generally has high-growth norms and makes its host nations better off, does it follow that poor countries would make themselves better off by importing, as Jones suggests, large numbers of Chinese citizens? The Chinese population of Singapore or Thailand might not be representative of the average Chinese: They are descended from the people who left, after all.

This is a brave book. It takes serious, research-driven looks at some of the dominant mantras of today. I recommend reading it. ★

—John Phelan

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The Circle of Education Funding™

The never-ending (not so) merry-go-round.

Like clockwork, every few months a Minnesota news outlet writes about a local school district facing budget cuts. Sometimes the story is tied to an upcoming (or recently defeated) ballot initiative to secure more funding from property taxpayers. Sometimes it's connected to a hearing where the school board is meeting to discuss budget cuts, new school boundaries, or even school closures. All of the stories share one thing in common: They fail to mention the cost of the district's latest teacher contract settlement, even though it represents the most expensive item in every school budget.

The stories about local school district funding woes illustrate perfectly the phenomenon known as the Circle of Education Funding™. The Circle of Education Funding has been happening over and over again in Minnesota for decades, with no end in sight.

The Circle begins at the top, with the Minnesota Legislature increasing state funding for K-12 schools. It happens every budget year no matter which party controls the House and Senate. Total state expenditures for K-12 schools in Minnesota increased from \$10.423 billion in 2002-03 to \$24.258 billion in 2024-25. That's a 133 percent

increase in 22 years, way more than the rate of inflation.

Once the dust settles on the K-12 funding increase, the Minnesota Department of Education produces "runs" for each local school district. The next part of the Circle of Education Funding involves local teacher unions using these public "runs" to determine how much money their school board will have available for the next budget. This gives them a remarkably strong position at the bargaining table as negotiations begin on their contract. It's hard for the school board to say, "We can't afford that" when the union knows exactly

how much money will be in the bank.

Teacher unions in Minnesota have the upper hand in these negotiations in two other ways. First, they get involved in elections by endorsing and supporting candidates for the school board. In fact, licensed teachers are now running for and winning school board seats in their home districts. Even though they may teach in a different school district, a built-in conflict of interest remains. Second, the potential disruption of a

The legislature appropriates more money, the unions grab it for salaries, the school board cuts middle school band, and everyone blames the legislature for underfunding. Rinse and repeat.

teacher strike makes most school board members too scared to call their bluff.

The result is teacher contract settlements that eat up every penny in new state money. Sometimes the union negotiates for more than the district can afford, as we saw in the last Minneapolis settlement. It was no coincidence that the Minneapolis superintendent resigned immediately after signing that unaffordable contract.

Since schools are mostly a people-intensive enterprise, upwards of 75 percent of the average school budget is comprised of salaries and benefits. Once the school board agrees to their union contracts, only 25 percent of the budget remains available for balancing.

Final teacher contract settlements need

to be ratified by a vote of the school board, frequently at their November or December meeting, often on the board's consent calendar. There is very little discussion. The room is empty. The press rarely mentions it, let alone reports on the dollar cost increase of the contract.

Fast-forward a few months to March and a different story emerges. The district announces it is facing a huge budget deficit and must make deep cuts in order to balance the budget. The budget cut proposals include eliminating the middle school band program, cutting Spanish instruction, making students walk farther to school, and raising fees for football and other sports. Remember, because the union contracts have been signed, only 25 percent of the budget is available for cutting.

This school board meeting is packed with angry parents; the press is there reporting about the proposed cuts. The superintendent and school board members lament their tough decisions, and some propose appealing to voters to increase operating revenue. There is much weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This leads us to the final part of the Circle: the blame game. Everyone must lobby the Minnesota Legislature to in-

crease funding for K-12 schools! These horrible cuts are evidence our schools are underfunded.

And thus, the Circle perpetuates itself, round and round, year after year, Democrats and Republicans, urban schools, suburban schools, rural schools. The legislature appropriates more money, the unions grab it for salaries, the school board cuts middle school band, and everyone blames the legislature for underfunding. Rinse and repeat.

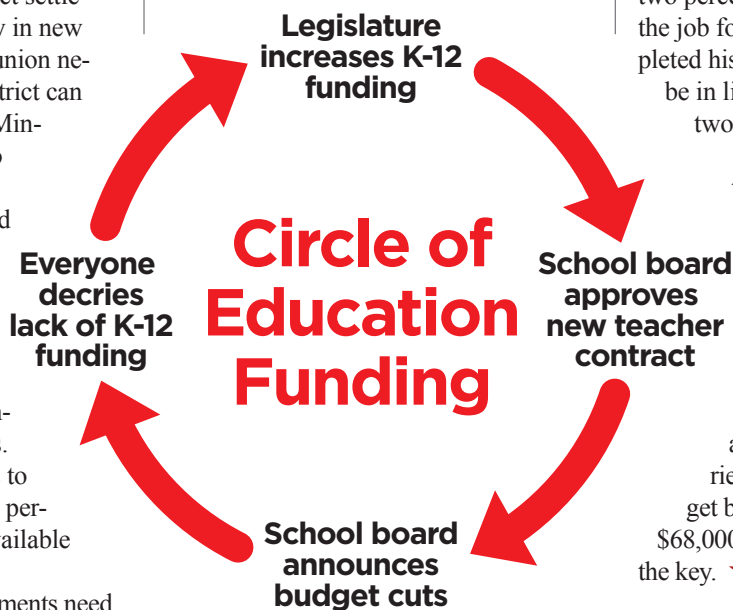
How do we break the Circle?

The key to breaking the Circle of Education Funding is placing more attention on the teacher contract settlement every two years. Teachers are paid based on a system of steps and lanes. For every year a teacher completes, they automatically move up a step, no matter how their students perform. For every new milestone, such as a master's degree, the teacher moves over a lane, no matter if the degree is even relevant to what they're teaching. Since the pay scale is tied to the steps and lanes, each move means more money automatically. When you read in the paper that teachers received a two percent raise, that means the entire scale was increased by two percent. In this system, a teacher on the job for 10 years who recently completed his or her master's degree could be in line for a much larger raise than two percent.

If a local community values their teachers and supports using the new money from the legislature each year for increased salaries, good for them. As long as everyone knows the ramifications to the rest of the school budget.

If a local community thinks a teacher with 10 years of experience and a master's degree can get by with a nine-month contract of \$68,000, that's ok too. Transparency is the key. ★

—Bill Walsh





Behind the Curtain

Matt Taibbi's speech at American Experiment's Fall Briefing warns about government censorship.

Matt Taibbi has been a journalist for over 30 years in addition to having grown up in a family of reporters. Despite his experience and covering countless stories, the “Twitter Files” was still “an entirely new ball game” to him. In the opening of his speech given at American Experiment’s 2023 Fall Briefing, Taibbi expressed his ongoing disbelief with a chuckle and halfhearted smile saying, “If you see a look of amazement come over my face from time to time, it’s because I’m still not over the fact that I’ve lived long enough to see free speech become controversial.”

What followed was an hour of revelations of the censorship coalition that has been formed between social media companies, media members, and U.S. government agencies. With his exposé of the full-throated attempt by the U.S. government and its allies to subvert the

freedoms and self-governance of the American people, Taibbi has not only sounded the alarm, but has given those who oppose these draconian actions the necessary impetus to fight against their continuation.

The purchase of X (previously known as Twitter) by Elon Musk will go down in history as one of the most consequential pro-free speech acts in American history. A major byproduct of this unprecedented acquisition was the invitation sent to Taibbi and other independent journalists, such as Michael Shellenberger and Bari Weiss, to investigate the history of Twitter’s heavy-handed censorship and shadow banning of conservatives.

What the group uncovered was a web of actors conspiring to usurp the normal function of American representative democracy through censorship and deplatforming. Taibbi laid out the

details of this expansive censorship coalition — from direct payments made to the FBI by Twitter to thousands of content moderation requests from federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and even the Treasury Department.

Taibbi questioned how Americans had gone from enjoying a society where everyone believed in values such as freedom of expression and self-determination to one in which the government and Big Tech were actively working against such values. Twitter’s internal communications contained the “unconcealed dialogues and plans of [this] second more depressing version of America.” Those involved were revealed as a “self-appointed oligarchy of highly pessimistic anti-democratic elitists” who believed power flows “from them down to the

population.”

This oligarchy included media reporters who were included on requests to remove accounts like “an inter-office email.” How could the media, instead of exposing government corruption, take part in such a scandal? Taibbi points out that they believed that President Trump and the “prospect of fully unregulated online debate” were such an existential threat to democracy that a “shared endeavor” must be created to regulate the population and any possible populist uprising.

Most worryingly, Taibbi found that intelligence agencies, both foreign and domestic, had participated in this surveillance, turning their focus from threats like ISIS to American social media users. He was bewildered to learn of the existence of a state department effort called the Global Engagement Center that was set up to monitor social media communications. Another eye-opening example came from discovered communications between two Twitter lawyers, one being former FBI General Counsel Jim Baker, jokingly discussing how “the entire Baltimore field office of the FBI appeared to be doing nothing but searching for terms of service violations on Twitter.” “Much more unnerving than a censorship regime,” Taibbi clarifies, “this was an unregulated global surveillance mechanism of unprecedented scale.” Agreeing with American Experiment president John Hinderaker, Taibbi believes this censorship coalition has “achieved more success in undermining American democracy than any other movement of its type in our history.”

This stark turn of American surveillance capabilities against the American people is enabled through the overwhelming amount of data available to government agencies and the existing infrastructure set up in the aftermath of 9/11. According to Taibbi, “the U.S. government and its allies ... now have



Taibbi has not only sounded the alarm, but has also given those who oppose these draconian actions the necessary impetus to fight against their continuation.

access to more data about individual citizens in their own countries than even the most infamous totalitarian regimes of the past.” Additionally, military and intelligence services were created and used for monitoring and tracking foreign terrorists in the wake of 9/11. Now used against Americans and their speech, these services had gone from “counterterrorism to counterpopulism.”

Disturbingly, the knowledge of this new surveillance scheme has resulted in widespread self-censorship. Taibbi explains that “they are able to detect so quickly when people cross certain boundaries of thought or when they venture or express any interest in a forbidden idea that they’re able to essentially wipe out the instinct to rebel in people before it even appears.” Simply visiting a website that has “dangerous ideas” can garner being equated with the author of those ideas. Knowing they are being watched, people begin to “[move] their spiritual and political lives inward.” The prospect of being deplatformed from social media, refused banking services, and even being the target of a federal

investigation is enough to deter people from seeking the truth.

But even true information can be regarded as harmful. Stanford University’s Virality Project, an example cited by Taibbi, suggested to social media platforms that they “may want to censor true content that promotes vaccine hesitancy.” To

Taibbi, such a “disinformational fact” is “straight out of Orwell,” an example of “pure doublethink.” Taibbi rightly points out that “disinformation is a completely subjective concept, and it drifts more and more as they get more license to use these terms.”

Throughout Taibbi’s speech, there was a sense of disquiet in the audience. Conservatives have long suspected that Big Tech was censoring them. However, until the Twitter Files came out, the extent to which the federal government was fueling this abhorrent practice was not fully understood. Now exposed, these revelations are hard to fully comprehend. More maddening is the lack of consequences for those trampling on the First Amendment. Perhaps Americans have forgotten what it means to be free.

Taibbi ended his speech by saying, “If you forget what freedom is and why it’s important, you won’t know to complain in its absence.” Calling the audience to action, Taibbi said “we need to start wondering who’s going to teach the next generation to care enough to fight for itself.” The Twitter Files must become a rallying cry among freedom-loving Americans of all political stripes. Our government is instituted to serve the people, not censor and surveil them. If the memory of what it means to be a free people is fading in the minds of Americans, then the Twitter Files must become the fuel that will reignite the blaze for a new generation. ★

—Caleb Larson

Larson is a member of American Experiment’s Young Leaders Council.

Green Energy



Living the Lies

Debunking electric vehicle myths.

Once in a great while, the problems surrounding electric vehicles (EVs) are so pronounced that even supportive outlets like the *Star Tribune* are forced to acknowledge them. On Nov. 25, 2023, Evan Ramstad wrote one such article: “Switching bus fleets to electric will be more of an evolution than revolution,” highlighting the multitude of entirely foreseeable potholes that electric buses are hitting in towns across Minnesota. The piece is solid journalism that debunks several of the lies EV advocates have told Minnesotans for years.

Continuing in that vein, here are three of the common EV myths that are debunked by the lived experiences of the Minnesota towns that have bought these buses.

Myth 1:

EVs are cheaper to operate

Everyone knows electric buses cost about twice as much as diesel-powered buses. However, Fresh Energy, a lead-

ing wind, solar, and EV misinformation group, wrote, “The case for EV rebates in Minnesota and beyond,” in Dec. 2021, claiming that “EVs are cheaper to operate and maintain over their lifetime than their fossil fuel-powered counterparts.”

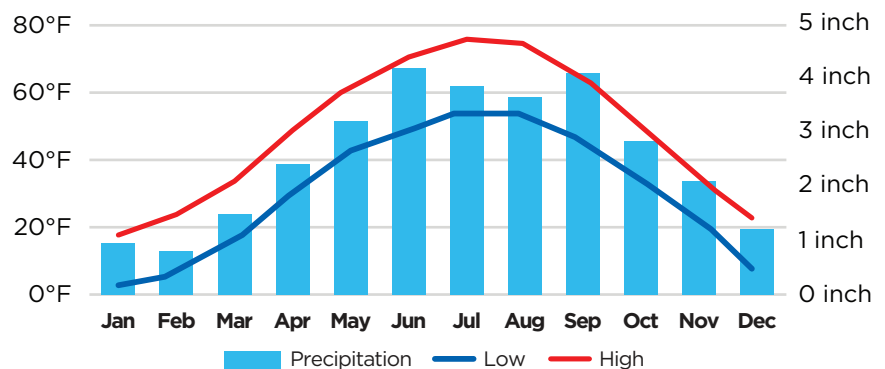
Transit officials in the Twin Cities and Duluth would beg to differ. The ar-

The Duluth system had to cut back on the winter usage of e-buses because the cold temperatures and steep hills **used so much electricity that the buses were not able to finish their driving shifts.**

ticle by Ramstad indicates that e-buses are less efficient than the diesel-powered buses they were meant to replace.

“We’re still paying more on a per-mile basis for electric than for diesel,” said Carrie Desmond, the head of electric bus infrastructure at Metro Transit in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Duluth Climate Graph



Source: U.S. Climate Data

Myth 2:

EVs are great winter vehicles

In a Nov. 2023 article, Fresh Energy writes, “Electric vehicles are great winter cars.” The City of Duluth has had a vastly different experience.

In 2019, the Duluth Transit Agency (DTA) bought seven 40-foot buses, representing 10 percent of its fleet. Despite the fact that these e-buses cost \$900,000, nearly twice as much as normal, diesel-powered buses, they were not able to do the same work as their conventional counterparts.

The Duluth system had to cut back on the winter usage of e-buses because the cold temperatures and steep hills used so much electricity that the buses were not able to finish their driving shifts. The *Minnesota Reformer* noted that Duluth’s e-buses lost 60 percent of their range in the cold until they installed diesel-powered heaters on the buses to save battery charge.

The same occurred in the Twin Cities, as Metro Transit reported (on its own website) that its electric buses lost 40 percent of their range in the winter. The *Reformer* noted, “Any electric bus that operates in the state can’t truly be zero emissions for the foreseeable future, as both Duluth and Metro Transit’s electrics use diesel-fueled heaters to minimize the battery range loss.”

Duluth found that the e-buses performed best when the temperatures outside ranged from 40 to 65 degrees, which is unfortunate because the average high temperatures in Duluth are below 40 degrees for about five months of the year.

Myth 3:

EV batteries will quickly become exponentially better

Electric vehicle boosters and wind and solar advocates frequently argue that these technologies will experience exponential increases in efficiency, like the gains that occurred with microchips. This hasn’t proven true. An excerpt from the *Star Tribune* article reads:

There was a period of time when people in the industry were suggesting that the battery technology was going to evolve so fast that it would be kind of like semiconductors, maybe doubling at some predictable rate,” Brian Funk, chief operating officer for Metro Transit, said. “That’s not been the experience,” he added. “We can get more battery and we can go farther than when we placed the order for these [buses], but it’s not orders of magnitude difference.

All the challenges these electric bus initiatives are experiencing were entirely foreseeable because this expensive technology is not ready for primetime,

All the challenges these electric bus initiatives are experiencing were entirely foreseeable because this expensive technology is not ready for primetime, a point that American Experiment has made for years.

a point that American Experiment has made for years.

Electric vehicles are not a one-to-one replacement for conventional cars because they are not as convenient. This is a key reason why “Quantifying Electric Vehicle Mileage in the United States,” a new peer-reviewed paper published in 2023, found EVs are driven 4,477 fewer miles than conventional cars every year.

Using taxpayer-funded transportation dollars on EVs instead of traditional vehicles is a waste of money that results in poorer service for those who depend on public transit. Pretending otherwise is a denial of the facts on the ground. ★

—Isaac Orr



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Quite Contrary

Our adversarial system of justice is under attack from within.

The importance of our adversarial system

We should all be proud to live in a country where people are considered innocent until proven guilty. Our justice system is built on a foundation of fairness and balance, using the well-conceived “adversarial” system where each party is tasked with representing their respective interests by presenting evidence and arguments before a neutral judge and a jury of peers.

The balanced approach provided by an adversarial model ensures that our system of justice maintains its reputation as the gold standard of fairness and due process. Unfortunately, our system is under attack — from within. The balance is being undermined, and justice is suffering as a result.

The case

In 2004, Marvin Haynes was proven guilty of first-degree murder, committed

during the armed robbery of a flower shop in north Minneapolis.

Police developed probable cause that Haynes was the shooter and arrested him. Two eyewitnesses picked Haynes out of photo lineups (including the victim’s sister, exclaiming, “Oh my God, that’s him,” upon seeing Haynes’ photo). Both witnesses later identified Haynes in an in-person lineup and in court to varying degrees. Several of Haynes’ friends and relatives gave police statements indicating Haynes had become involved in armed robberies, that he was intent on committing a robbery the day of the murder, that he had been carrying a chrome revolver in the weeks leading up to the murder (the type of gun used in this murder), and that he made comments about “shooting an old white man” contemporaneously with the murder at the flower shop.

The county attorney’s office reviewed the evidence and independently agreed

that probable cause existed to charge Haynes with murder. Upon which a Hennepin County Grand Jury listened to the evidence against Haynes and agreed that probable cause existed to indict him with first-degree murder. A respected Hennepin County District Court Judge presided over evidentiary hearings and the trial and made legal decisions to ensure Haynes received a fair trial.

Haynes made no pre-trial appeals regarding the evidence presented against him and he was tried before a jury of his peers in 2005. The jury listened to testimony, reviewed evidence during the trial, and determined Haynes was guilty beyond reasonable doubt.

Haynes received an automatic appeal to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 2007 during which it heard arguments from Haynes’ attorney. There was no claim or argument that the eyewitness identifications of Haynes were problematic during that process. The Supreme Court

denied Haynes' appeal, ruling the district court had properly ruled on issues of law during the trial, and that there was no prosecutorial misconduct in the case.

Haynes was sentenced to life in prison.

Enter Mary Moriarty

Fast-forward to 2022. Mary Moriarty, the former chief public defender in Hennepin County, announced her intention to run for Hennepin County Attorney, the county's chief prosecutor. Many saw this as a disaster in the making and warned the electorate, to no avail, against putting Moriarty in this position.

During the endorsement process, the *Star Tribune* said of Moriarty: "...we're concerned that her approach doesn't adequately emphasize public safety. Moriarty also brings baggage after her stint as chief public defender ended in controversy related to social media posts, her managerial style, and tense relationships with other leaders in the criminal justice system."

And it continues, "...the Editorial Board remains concerned about her ability to transition from defender to prosecutor and to provide effective leadership for the office."

Despite these concerns, Moriarty took office in January 2023. Within months, Moriarty made clear she would be undermining the adversarial system of justice in Hennepin County by joining forces with advocacy groups and defense attorneys and using "science" to bring about her vision of justice and public safety in Hennepin County.

No fewer than a dozen families and victim advocacy groups have since spoken publicly against Moriarty and her decisions to either not prosecute, under-prosecute, or seek to overturn convictions of violent criminals adjudicated decades earlier.

Moriarty's actions have been outrageous and undermine Minnesota's public safety and justice systems in 2023. Yet she asks the public to deny what they have both seen and experienced, and in-

stead believe — on her insistence — that she is a righteous arbiter of justice.

The exoneration of Marvin Haynes

In June 2023, Haynes filed a Petition for Post-Conviction Relief, despite being over 15 years past the cutoff to legally do so. Moriarty waived the statutory time bar and the procedural bar on Haynes' petition. Given these concessions by

Within months, Moriarty made clear she would be undermining the adversarial system of justice in Hennepin County by joining forces with advocacy groups and defense attorneys and using "science" to bring about her vision of justice and public safety in Hennepin County.

Moriarty, the court scheduled a post-conviction evidentiary hearing later that fall.

Those in attendance at the hearing have expressed to my sources that it was apparent Moriarty's office did not act as an adversarial check and balance against Haynes' arguments and offered passive and limited cross-examination of witnesses and evidence presented on behalf of Haynes.

Following the hearing, Moriarty and the Innocence Project joined together to draft a six-page order that claimed Haynes had been denied due process "because his conviction relied on constitutionally defective eyewitness identification evidence." Moriarty agreed that "the interest of justice would be served

by dismissing with prejudice all charges against Petitioner in this matter" and to vacate his murder conviction.

Judge William Koch signed that order, and Haynes was released to the street following a hearing held for that purpose in the Hennepin County Government Center.

This revisionist approach to evaluating decades-old convictions that were properly tried and for which multiple appeals have been considered and rejected has been particularly troubling. It's a dangerous path that needs to be closed for all but the most persuasive and clear-cut cases involving, for example, indisputable DNA evidence.

Attacking eyewitness identifications decades after the fact, especially when those identifications were not called into question contemporaneously with the trial, is just pure nonsense. Tragically, it is an attack on and serves to undermine the value of this critical evidence going forward.

The emergence of progressive prosecutors across the country, many of whom were former defense attorneys, has resulted in the inappropriate teaming of prosecutors and defense attorneys in support of the defendant's arguments. This is overtly problematic.

A justice system in which the defense attorney teamed with the prosecution to help make the state's arguments against the defendant is no justice system at all. There would be revolt, and rightly so. Why, then, would anyone believe it's appropriate for the prosecutor to abdicate making arguments on behalf of the state, while, in turn, making arguments on behalf of the defendant?

Haynes and all criminal defendants deserve a competent and vigorous defense. Our system depends on it. But when prosecutors intentionally abdicate their adversarial role, balance is destroyed, and justice suffers.

We should expect more of the same as more progressive-minded defense attorneys seek key prosecutorial positions. ★

—David Zimmer

History



The University of St. Thomas is one of many institutions adopting apologetic land acknowledgments.

Ken Woller / Shutterstock.com

Promised Land

Trendy ‘land acknowledgments’ distort more history than they claim to be revealing.

Are you and your family living on “stolen land”? The “land acknowledgments” we see everywhere say yes. Today, many government bodies, cultural institutions, and universities routinely claim that Minnesota’s current residents are here illegally — unjustly exploiting land that rightfully belongs to the Dakota people.

The city of Northfield, for example, declares that it “stands” on Dakota homelands and acknowledges “the ongoing injustices that we have committed.” Hennepin County states that it “occupies” what has been the “indigenous homeland of the Dakota Nation” “for millennia.”

The Minnesota Opera recognizes its “occupation” of land of “great...significance to Dakota people” and deplores the “unjust seizure of their lands.” The Chil-

dren’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis apologizes for benefiting from “systems that have hoarded power and marginalized Indigenous Nations.” The University of St. Thomas avows that it “occupies the ancestral and current homelands of the Dakota people”; condemns “the tools of settler colonialism” undertaken “in the name of white supremacy”; and recognizes other tribes “whose lands were colonized by the United States and are currently occupied by the state of Minnesota.”

Typically, land acknowledgments are read aloud before a government meeting or preceding an event such as a play or a university commencement. All in attendance are expected to hang their heads in a ritual public confession of guilt.

But wait. Why don’t land acknowledg-

ments ask the obvious follow-up question: How did the Dakota themselves come to occupy the land where the Twin Cities now stand? These statements promote a simplistic “good guy/bad guy narrative” of greedy, immoral settlers versus virtuous, long-suffering Native Americans, but the historical record tells a different, more complex story.

Three central facts illustrate the egregious double standards at work here.

First, the Dakota arrived in southern Minnesota — not “millennia” ago, but just a few generations before the U.S.

These statements promote a simplistic “good guy/bad guy narrative” of greedy, immoral settlers versus virtuous, long-suffering Native Americans, but the historical record tells a different, more complex story.

military came in 1805. They fled here around 1700 after the Ojibwe, their traditional bitter enemies, drove them from their villages at Mille Lacs. The Iowa and Ojibwe tribes were hunting here then, but the Dakota did not negotiate with or compensate them. Instead, they killed or expelled them.

This pattern of conquest and migration was typical of North America at the time, as it has been across much of the world throughout history. Tribal boundaries were continually fluid, thanks to near-constant warfare, feuding, and enslavement.

The Dakota were particularly warlike, according to several 19th-century observers. Henry Schoolcraft, a geographer and ethnographer, wrote of their “predominant passion for war.” Indeed, in the first

half of the 19th century, “warfare” was “the most salient feature of aboriginal life,” as Theresa Schenck explained in her 2009 introduction to William Warren’s 1885 *History of the Ojibwe People*.

When the U.S. military arrived here, Schenck writes, “not only had the Ojibwe-Dakota conflict extended over two hundred years, it was still going on, much to the horror of the newcomers to Minnesota Territory.” Between 1820 and 1831, U.S. officials held at least 200 peace councils between the feuding Dakota and Ojibwe at Fort Snelling in an effort to curb the bloodshed, doubtless helping to save many Dakota and Ojibwe lives in the process.

Warfare was brutal. Dakota warriors killed men, women, and children indiscriminately, and scalping was ingrained in their culture. When men were scalped, the skin of the cheeks and chin was also taken, with ears attached. Warriors paraded these trophies around to cheers of the women, and scalp dances could last for weeks as they traveled from village to village.

An account by early settler Charlotte Clark Van Cleve, daughter of a military officer, of an 1827 Ojibwe reprisal for a previous Dakota attack conveys the bloody nature of Dakota-Ojibwe warfare. Men “tear off the scalps, and hand them to the chief, who hangs them around his neck,” she wrote. “Women and children with tomahawks and knives, cut deep gashes in the poor dead bodies, and scoop[p] up the hot blood with their hands. . . .” before the “mutilated” bodies are “thrown over the bluff into the river.”

Whites who witnessed such behavior were understandably revolted by it, and it was one reason they sometimes referred to Native Americans as “savages.”

The second problem with land acknowledgments is that they fail to convey how different the concept of “land possession” was at the time of settlement. Vast expanses of the 35 million acres the Dakota sold in the 1851 Mendota and Traverse des Sioux treaties (basically the

southern half of the state) were essentially uninhabited.

An estimated 7,000 Dakota lived there at the time, according to *Making Minnesota Territory, 1849-58*, edited by A.R. Kaplan and M. Ziebarth. However, the Dakota actually occupied only a small part of that land because they lived mostly by rivers and other water sources and roamed out only occasionally over any particular portion of the woods

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and prairies to hunt. This translates to a population density of 8.4 square miles per individual Dakota, or about 34 square miles per household of four.

The settlers who homesteaded there, many of whom were fleeing oppression or privation in Europe, bought the land in good faith from the federal government and can in no way be assigned moral blame for doing so.

Third, land acknowledgments accuse the U.S. government of injustice, but fail to inform their audiences that, in 1946, Congress established an Indian Claims Commission that meticulously examined tribal claims and grievances from across the nation. In the decades-long process that followed, the commission had “great latitude” to render “moral judgments” wherever it detected “earmarks of overreaching and unfair play.”

The Dakota filed claims involving millions of acres, which included land on

which Minneapolis and St. Paul arose. In the end, the U.S. government paid tribal members, and non-enrolled lineal descendants, millions of dollars in numerous payments that extended well into the 21st century. This was in addition to all the compensation the Dakota received pursuant to treaties prior to 1863 and other money they received after 1863.

In accepting the Commission’s final judgments, the Dakota agreed those judgments would “dispose of all rights, claims or demands, which the claimants have asserted, or could have asserted, with respect to the subject matter of the cases.” Today, activists who promote land acknowledgments behave as if this comprehensive judicial resolution never took place.

Land acknowledgments fail to “acknowledge” many other important facts. These include the complex story of the European-American encounter with the New World, which brought 5,000 years of technological advances from which indigenous people here had been cut off.

At the time of settlement, for example, the Dakota were essentially subsistence hunter-gatherers, and often faced famine and death in harsh Minnesota winters. Traders and Native agents supplied them with goods they eagerly sought — metal traps, axes, guns, and knives that helped them survive. Missionaries created a written language for them, and government officials assisted with agriculture to help them achieve food security.

Today, the Dakota — most of whom now share European heritage through intermarriage — profit greatly from the contemporary advantages we all take for granted. These range from electricity and indoor plumbing to higher education and modern medicine.

The next time you’re asked to publicly pledge allegiance to the “stolen land” narrative, it would be advisable to ask if you and others in the audience have the information necessary to assess the credibility of the politically charged claims behind it. ★

—Katherine Kersten

**≡ GOLDEN
TURKEY
AWARD**



**GOLDEN
TURKEY
AWARD**

The Legislature Builds Its Taj Mahal

American Experiment's annual award highlights the state's wasteful spending of taxpayers' money.



“Once the building cost grew to \$729 million, it became the obvious choice for the most wasteful project of 2023.”

—American Experiment president John Hinderaker

THE WINNER
\$729 million

The Minnesota Legislature is about to build another new office building for themselves, and the Golden Turkey committee is here for it. Without a single vote on the floor of the House or Senate, this wasteful spending project and lack of transparency earned the Minnesota House this year’s Golden Turkey Award, given by Center of the American Experiment. Most employees at the Minnesota House of Representatives *still* haven’t fully returned to the office since the COVID-19 shutdowns, but that’s not stopping them from building their own Taj Mahal costing more than double what they spent on the entire State Capitol building renovation.

In the closest vote in Golden Turkey history, the State Office Building overtook the Northern Lights Express train to Duluth after it was announced that high interest rates for the palatial project ballooned the cost to \$729 million. Over 3,000 Minnesotans participated in this year’s contest.

The Golden Turkey Award is a light-hearted contest to bring attention to the budget and allow Minnesotans to weigh in on the silliest spending of the year. Past winners include the Feeding Our Future fraud, Gov. Tim Walz’s \$6.9 million unused morgue, and an extravagant rest stop on Highway 35.

“Never before has the cost of a Golden Turkey nominee increased during the voting window,” says John Hinderaker, president of Center of the American Experiment. “Once the building cost grew to \$729 million, it became the obvious choice for the most wasteful project of 2023.”

The building received additional votes when it was revealed that a private balcony facing the Capitol would be part of the design, open only to members of the Majority House Democratic membership.

We all remember back in 2014 when Senate Democrats

came up with a creative way to finance the new Senate Office Building. Rather than go through the normal state bonding process, which requires a supermajority vote in the legislature, they used “certificates of participation.” That building cost \$90 million and was one of the reasons Senate Democrats lost their majority in the 2016 election. If the Golden Turkey Awards were around back then, this building surely would have been a top contender.

Perhaps out of jealousy, the House used a similar process to build their new office space. Since the House has twice as many members as the Senate, the project should cost twice as much as the Senate building, right? Don’t be silly! The new State Office Building will cost almost \$729 million. That’s *seven times* the cost of the Senate Office Building and twice the cost of the State Capitol renovation in 2017.

The State Office Building (SOB) is the home of the Minnesota House of Representatives and the Secretary of State. The building was built in 1932 and contains an office for all 134 members of the House along with their staff. The top floors house the Legislative Reference Library, the House Research Department, and the Revisor’s Office. The SOB is next door to the Transportation Building and across the street from the Capitol.

No one argues the building isn’t old and in need of repair. But in true state government fashion, House leaders are going well beyond “needed repairs” to build themselves a brand-new building fit for royalty. Rep. Kurt Daudt (R-Crown) called it the “Taj Mahal of office buildings.”

Their main argument for a new building is safety and security. According to House leadership, it is impossible to keep members and staff safe in the current building. So rather than doing something about the rampant lawlessness in the surrounding neighborhood — not to mention the entire state — their solution is to spend \$729 million of taxpayer money to build themselves a fortress. Why didn’t we think of that?

The current building is 290,000 square feet. The new building will be 456,000 square feet thanks to a massive new wing for committee hearings and will be open to the public. That way, House members can wall themselves off in the other wing behind metal detectors and security. The days of popping in on your state representative are over — appointment only, please! Odd, considering most of their employees haven’t fully returned to the office since COVID and House employees are only required to be at the office two days a week. Not to mention the fact that the House is only in session from January to May.

If the boondoggle building doesn't make you mad enough, wait 'til you hear how they funded it, or more accurately, how they failed to fund it. The House knew spending almost \$729 million on an opulent new office building wouldn't be popular with voters, so they approved the expenditure using a convoluted two-step process. First, they slipped a provision into an omnibus bill that authorized the state to set up a spending account for safety improvements on buildings near the Capitol built before 1940 (turns out there's only one building that qualifies). One year later, the House Rules Committee (not the full House or Senate) approved the renovation of the SOB using the same certificate of participation scheme used for the Senate office building.

Even the financing of this project qualifies as a boondoggle since certificates of participation require much larger interest payments than normal debt, which is how the project ballooned from \$454 million to \$729 million. All of this was done to avoid a transparent debate in the House and Senate where legislators could be held accountable for their votes. Not a single member, Republican or Democrat, objected as the bill was passed in 2021 allowing this to happen. No one even mentioned a new SOB as the language was passed. As a matter of fact, the only discussion of the provision came in the House Ways and Means Committee when bill author Rep. Mike Nelson (DFL-Brooklyn Park) offered an amendment, saying: "Madam Chair, the A-4 amendment is something that's being worked out between the Governor and the two leaders in the House and the Senate having to do with setting up a Capitol security account to deal with security issues around the Capitol complex. It's authorizing revenue bonds and certificates of participation to be sold to create this fund to deal with the security issues that we have at the Capitol."

A sleepy amendment to address "security issues" turned into a \$729 million renovation project. The new SOB won the Golden Turkey not only because it's a shrine to wasteful spending of taxpayer money, but also because the process to approve it lacked transparency and accountability.

Runner-up

The Northern Lights Express, yet another wasteful train project

The Golden Turkey committee tried to get through the nomination process this year without choosing a rail or bus project, but those plans were derailed (get it?) when the legislature spent \$194.5 million on a train from Minneapolis to Duluth called the Northern Lights Express. For a \$35 ticket, riders leave from Target Field Station in downtown



\$194.5 million

Minneapolis and arrive in downtown Duluth 2.5 hours later — exactly how long it takes by car. Once in Duluth, you're on your own. Want to go to Canal Park? Just walk across the bridge over Highway 35. How about getting to the North Shore? Better rent a car, it's another two hours. You'll have to try an Uber to get anywhere else in Duluth. Have your husband and kid with you? That's another \$70 one-way. Dig deep in those pockets to get back home: \$35 please!

The genius transportation planners have pegged ridership for the Northern Lights Express at 750,000 in the first year and one million by 2040. And we all know their track record (get it?) on ridership projections from previous projects like the Northstar Commuter Rail. Never mind the exact same line was discontinued in 1985 due to (you guessed it) lack of ridership.

Supporters of the train point to an important stop about halfway to Duluth to bolster their ambitious ridership numbers: Grand Casino Hinckley. But will senior citizens from the Twin Cities drive or Uber downtown to ride a train for \$35 to get to the casino? You can play a lot of nickel slots with \$35 (just sayin'). Since the train stop in Hinckley is more than a mile from the casino, they will have to factor in a shuttle ride as well.

The total cost of the new train is projected to be \$592.3 million, and the balance was supposed to come from the federal government. But the project only received \$500,000 from the Federal Railroad Administration's first round of funding (totaling \$8.2 billion). And that's just to build it. The Minnesota Department of Transportation predicts fare income will only pay for 63 percent of the \$18.9 million needed to operate the line each year. The rest will be picked up by state taxpayers.

Supporters also tout the creation of 3,000 construction jobs and 500 permanent jobs once the line is operating. They also brag about creating \$15 million in local and state sales tax revenue during the construction process. Spending almost \$200 million in income tax revenue will yield \$15 million in sales tax revenue. Yay us!

American Experiment economist John Phelan (esteemed member of the Golden Turkey Award committee) summed up the Northern Lights Express project this way: "It only makes sense to subsidize things people will actually use. This train will end up being a very expensive way to ferry oxygen from one part of the state to another."

Third place

The Governor's (money pit) mansion

The first person Tim Walz called after he became governor in 2018 was his real estate agent in Mankato. Since the job of governor includes the perk of living in a historic mansion on Summit Avenue, he could ditch his mortgage and move the family to St. Paul. After comfortably winning a second term, Walz proposed a \$7 million renovation to the mansion, which quickly ballooned to \$12 million over the summer. The Golden Turkey committee questioned the need for the expensive renovations and, more broadly, the need for the residence in the first place.



\$12 million

In 1965, Olivia Dodge generously donated her family home in the renowned St. Paul neighborhood to the State of Minnesota to be used as the official residence of the governor and his family. Most governors moved in temporarily during their tenure but usually kept their family home. Gov. Tim Pawlenty had two daughters still in high school when he was governor, so the Pawlenty family used the mansion sparingly and mainly for meetings and social events. Jesse Ventura's son infamously held wild parties at the residence when his parents stayed at their Maple Grove home on weekends. At one point, the State Patrol was collecting driver's licenses of party guests to make sure there was no underage drinking. Contrast that with Democrats Mark Dayton and Walz, who immediately sold their homes and moved into the mansion on Summit, saving themselves a monthly mortgage payment.

The effort to renovate the mansion has been a problem from the beginning. Since Walz doesn't own a home, the first thing he had to do was find a temporary place to live during construction. Somehow, he thought it would be a good idea to rent an 18,000-square-foot lakeside home in tiny Sunfish Lake with a monthly rent of \$17,000. After getting pounded by the press and Republican lawmakers for the price tag, Walz was saved from further ridicule by a timely vacancy in the president's house at the University of Minnesota and wisely decided to move there instead. Hopefully we got the security deposit back on the Sunfish Lake property.

Unfortunately, any savings didn't last long because the cost to renovate the mansion increased from \$7 million to \$12 million. The cost increases were so large that they forced the Department of Administration to pause and ask legislative leaders for permission to proceed with the renovations. Since most of them imagine living in the Governor's Mansion someday, Walz had no trouble getting the green light. Speaker of the House Melissa Hortman told MPR she's "not surprised it's an expensive proposition to house the governor in a secure location." They always fall back on the security issue.

For decades, Minnesota governors have used private fundraising to upgrade the mansion. At one point in the Ventura administration, the mansion was closed and the staff laid off. But the attitude of today's state government is spend, spend, spend. Always with someone else's money.

The rent fiasco and cost increases made the governor's mansion an easy nominee for a Golden Turkey this year. Votes for this project also sent the message to St. Paul that another solution should be found to safely (and affordably) house the governor and his family.

Fourth place

Flying squirrel research

When they tell you we can't afford to "fully fund" schools, house the homeless, and take care of grandma in the nursing home, just respond with these three words: flying squirrel research. That's right, Minnesota's state government spent the entire \$17.6 billion surplus, raised taxes an additional \$9 billion, and still had \$186,000 left over to study flying squirrels.

Specifically, the legislature sent \$186,000 from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) to the Natural Resources Research Institute in Duluth "to determine current distribution and habitat associations of northern and southern flying squirrels to fill key knowledge gaps in flying squirrel status in Minnesota."

Forget the education achievement gap — the flying squirrel knowledge gap must be addressed with this groundbreaking research. It turns out southern flying squirrels have been migrating farther and farther north every year and researchers in Duluth have a hypothesis about the cause: climate change.

Climate change! You've said the magic words. Please pass Go and collect your \$200 (which will be taxed). In order to save the planet from the impending doom of global warming, we must study the migration habits of flying squirrels in northern Minnesota.



\$186,000

Funding for this project is just one example of hundreds from the ENRTF, a frequent target for the Golden Turkey committee. Past nominees include giving homeowners \$350 grants to *not* grow grass in their yards, a \$1,000 grant for a woman to host a hands-on climate-mapping workshop where participants create maps of their personal emotional terrain of climate change, and \$250 million to find a noise that will deter bald eagles from flying into windmills. The ENRTF is the gift that keeps on giving (with your money) to the Golden Turkey committee.

As with many things in state government, flying squirrel research began with a small pilot program (\$7,500). This year's \$186,000 grant will fund the expansion into big-time academic research. Soon we'll have an entire academic department dedicated to small mammal research with a dozen employees.

You don't have to waste millions or billions of dollars to qualify for a Golden Turkey award. In fact, sometimes it's the smaller projects that infuriate us the most. For this reason, flying squirrel research at the University of Minnesota Duluth was nominated for a Golden Turkey award. ★



≡ POLITICAL HISTORY

Rudy Boschwitz (left), Al Quie (middle), Dave Durenberger (right) share a celebratory moment in 1978.

FROM John Phelan MIRACLE TO MASSACRE

How Minnesota returned to a two-party state.

Miracle

The outlook was bleak for the Republicans arriving at St. Cloud State University in November 1975 for their state party convention.

The DFL governor, Wendell Anderson, had been elected five years earlier and pushed through massive hikes in income, sales, and excise taxes designed to shift the burden of education funding from local property taxes. Dubbed the “Minnesota Miracle,” this proved popular with Minnesotans. In November 1972, as the state backed a Republican presidential candidate for the last time, it also, for the first time, handed the DFL a “trifecta” of the

governor's mansion and both state houses. The Democrats took this as a mandate to pass what one journalist called "a torrent of environmental, labor and consumer legislation that had been bottled up for years." In 1974, just three months after Pres. Richard Nixon's resignation, Anderson won every county in Minnesota and the DFL picked up 26 House seats for a majority of 103 to 31. The *St. Paul Dispatch* wrote, "Never have Republicans been thrown out in such numbers in Minnesota." "I think the Republicans have had it," William Sumner wrote in the *Dispatch*, "What [they] have developed through these thumps is not learning but brain damage."

The Republican Party had "lost everything but our underwear," 3rd District Rep. Bill Frenzel noted. He had hard words at the convention:

I did not come here to point the accusing finger at anybody except all of us. Everybody is in it. We are all guilty of the failures. I came again to say, "We have got to change, or we will keep on losing." After a while groups develop a sort of loser's syndrome. They don't really like losing, but they don't like winning enough to change their ways. It happens in corporations, partnerships, neighborhood groups, sewing circles, trade associations, and political parties. Let's not let our state party accept the role of loser willingly.

Most attendees would have agreed. But *what* was causing it to lose? And into what did the Republicans need to change in order to win? That is where the two wings of Minnesota's Republican Party disagreed.

Progressives, conservatives, and Independent-Republicans

When the Republican Party in Minnesota was founded in 1855, its platform called for, among other things, the abolition of slavery and the "enactment and enforcement of a Prohibitory Liquor Law." The party intended to use the power of government to effect social change, while it was the Democrats who sought to "conserve" the existing order — slavery and all. In a real sense, the Republicans were Minnesota's first progressives.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Republicans and Democrats battled for the progressive political ground. Franklin Roosevelt seized it decisively for the Democrats in the 1930s, but many Republicans, including some in Minnesota, were unwilling to concede. Gov. Harold Stassen hated communism, but so did Hubert Humphrey, and he was a little less willing, progressive Republican Dave Durenberger wrote decades later, "to employ government at all levels to tackle problems."

While government was limited there was little need for a "small government" movement. But as progressives grew government through the first two-thirds of the 20th century, such a movement emerged: "conservative," because it sought to return government to what, it claimed, was its proper constitutional domain.

In 1964, Barry Goldwater, who had blasted Eisenhower's Republican administration as "a dime store New Deal," won the Republican nomination promising "a choice, not an echo." He lost in a landslide but energized the conservative movement. A growing number of Republicans were no longer interested in accommodating the New Deal, Fair Deal, or Great Society; they wanted to roll them back. "The great challenge [today] is to keep alive the strength and spirit of the individual human being," a young Minnesota conservative, Vin Weber, explained. "People want to be heard... They want to be guaranteed that higher authorities won't mess up their lives."

The Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* threw another ingredient into this volatile political brew. Abortion became a political issue, but it cut across party lines. In 1971, a Republican state senator, George Pillsbury, led an effort to ease abortion restrictions and many suburban Republican women agreed. When the state party adopted a platform in 1974 opposing the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, many progressive candidates disavowed it and one of the founders of the GOP Women for Political Effectiveness, Emily Anne Tuttle, joined the DFL. Conservative Democrats, on the other

hand, came the other way.

Progressives, like Frenzel, warned the party's central committee of the "survival of the most enthusiastic," and predicted that the party would keep losing if it continued to be led by its "hard core." "We are going to have to do something that we talk about a lot but don't do very often," defeated Secretary of State Arlen Erdahl said. "That is to include people in the party who we don't agree with." But when new people did enter the tent, they were not always welcome. Decades later, Durenberger complained that "Democrats who were uncomfortable with their party's deepening commitment to civil rights and to a woman's right to an abortion drifted into the Republican fold."

Conservatives, on the other hand, thought the progressives were holding the party back. In 1977, Pat Pariseau, formerly one of those conservative DFLers, stunned the party's establishment by winning the 1st District chair, a position traditionally held by a progressive. "We had to change things in the party," she said, "and the only way to do that was to get some leadership positions."

The only issue resolved in St. Cloud was a party name change to

The [Republican] party intended to use the power of government to effect social change, while it was the Democrats who sought to "conserve" the existing order — slavery and all.

Independent-Republicans (IRs). This would, new chair Chuck Slocum said, “not only build the two-party system in Minnesota, but more accurately reflect the voter base of the present Republican Party.” The *Star Tribune* dismissed this attempt “to fuzz up [the] party’s name.” Indeed, its adoption brought no immediate electoral dividend. In 1976, the DFL extended its Senate majority to 49-18. “Let’s face it. We got clobbered,” Slocum admitted. “There are no two ways about it. Minnesota is a DFL state.”

Democratic divisions

The same month that Republicans gathered in St. Cloud, the *Star Tribune*’s Steve Alnes wrote, “I have complete faith in the fallibility of human institutions and am therefore certain that someplace along the road the DFL will blow it or at least mess it up badly enough to give the

In 1976, the DFL extended its Senate majority to 49-18.

“Let’s face it. We got clobbered,” Slocum admitted. “There are no two ways about it. Minnesota is a DFL state.”

Republicans new breath.” They did.

Sen. Walter Mondale’s election as vice president in 1976 left his senate seat open. Anderson, eager to graduate to the national stage, promptly resigned from the governorship with the understanding that Lt. Gov. Rudy Perpich, now governor, would appoint him to fill the vacancy — which he did. The unpopularity of this move was



Hennepin County Library

Gov. Rudy Perpich signs autographs in the Lowry Hill East neighborhood of Minneapolis, 1977.

compounded when, following Sen. Hubert Humphrey’s death in January 1978, Perpich appointed Humphrey’s widow to complete his term. This was common practice, as was Muriel Humphrey’s decision not to run for re-election. But with both Senate seats, the governorship, and the lieutenant governorship held by unelected appointees, Minnesotans approached 1978’s elections with a bitter taste in their mouths.

Now there were electoral dividends to be had. In a special election to the Congressional 7th District in February 1977, Arlan Stangeland won for the IRs. In seven special elections necessitated by the DFL’s ongoing musical chairs in 1977 and 1978, five IRs — Gaylin Den Ouden, Tony Onnen, Dee Knaak, Elton Redalen, and David Rued — won. Looking ahead to the midterms, Slocum wrote, “The party is coming back to life.” This view was not universal. One House DFL veteran said: “Well, yeah, we lost a couple of elections, but we have so many seats now that the loss of a few won’t matter.”

Then came another ingredient into

the DFL’s own increasingly volatile political brew. Its labor and liberal elements were increasingly at odds. In 1977 and 1978, two DFL state representatives, Al Wieser (La Crescent) and Glen Sherwood (Pine River), switched to the IRs. “Both men stated publicly that they philosophically belonged in the more conservative caucus,” Rod Searle, a House IR, wrote. “They also felt that the IR Party more

accurately reflected the goals of their constituents.” Don Fraser, a leading Congressional liberal representing Minnesota’s 5th District, was the favorite to take Humphrey’s old seat, but he reckoned without Humphrey’s old friend, businessman Bob Short. Fraser had supported legislation banning motorboats and snowmobiles from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, enraging residents in that DFL stronghold. Short primaried Fraser and won — barely — thanks to votes from the Iron Range. Short would run to the right of everybody in the general election, pledging to cut federal spending by \$100 billion and amend the Constitution to prohibit abortion.

Massacre

The mood at the IR’s 1978 convention in Minneapolis was very different from that in St. Cloud three years earlier. “We really have a chance this year,” said delegate Marsie Leier. “Let’s not blow it.”

As an exercise in not blowing it, the convention succeeded. With little fuss, Al Quie, a 20-year veteran of the House, was nominated to take on Perpich; Rudy Boschwitz, a prominent businessman and Republican National Committeeman, would run against

Anderson; and Durenberger would challenge Short. This “moderate” slate was well advised in a state where, even now, the DFL held a 20 percentage point advantage in preference over the IRs. Even the *Minneapolis Tribune* was impressed: “Minnesota’s Independent-



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Republicans clearly have produced their strongest team in years for top state political offices.”

As the economy sputtered through the 1970s and inflation pushed people into higher tax brackets, support for high taxes and government spending waned. Nationally, Goldwater’s heir, Ronald Reagan, was in the ascendant, and Jack Kemp and William Roth had a bill to cut federal income taxes by one-third. Quie’s polling indicated that “nothing was overwhelmingly important to voters except one thing: They thought taxes were too high,” and he declared his race “a referendum on the tax issue.”

The *Tribune* wrote, “The party has a new spirit, a new-found unity, a new sense of confidence. And all that is to the good for a vigorous two-party system needs a healthy Republican Party.” Two things accounted for this unity and confidence.

The first was the weariness of losing and the related prospect of success; these were great political solvents.

The second was the fact that, in the 1970s, Minnesota’s government grew so rapidly that even a progressive Republican could, in good conscience, campaign for smaller government. Durenberger, sounding a conservative note, said that Minnesotans “don’t trust government to spend their money the way they would spend it themselves,” and again, “[Fraser] believes government can do more for you than you can do for yourself.” Indeed, many DFLers felt the same way. “Their issue, which historically has been taxes, is kind of a national issue at this time,” DFL chairman Ulrich Scott noted. “There’s a conservative mood and it hurts.” “During the election campaign,” one IR ad proclaimed:

...DFL legislators always promise to cut taxes. But what happens when they get into office? They vote for new tax increases and raise state spending. Here are a few examples. In the last five years they increased state spending from

\$3.6 billion to \$6.5 billion. In the last four years, they have added 138 people to the legislative staff, and just last year they voted to double their own salaries. If that isn’t bad enough, while the DFL was feathering its own nest they hit senior citizens with a tax on pensions and increased overall taxes 40 percent faster than income.

...The only way to stop runaway spending and taxation is to elect an Independent-Republican legislature.



Competing campaign material from Fraser and Short in the 1978 DFL primary for the U.S. Senate.

They also hit the DFL for the round of appointments, erecting billboards at Halloween that read: “The DFL is going to face something scary — an election.”

Ample scope for blowing it remained. An October 1 poll showed Perpich leading Quie by 51 percent to 42 and Short up 46 to 39 on Durenberger. Only Boschwitz led his race, 48 to 44 percent. But the IRs held steady. Quie struck voters as “just an honest, stoic Norwegian dairy farmer,” Betty Wilson wrote in the *Minneapolis*

Star, with a campaign “about as exciting as watching an automobile rust.” Perpich’s lead had shrunk to within four points the weekend before the election, Boschwitz and Anderson were tied, and Durenberger had surged to a 14-point lead over Short. The *Minneapolis Tribune*’s “Minnesota Poll,” published on the eve of the election, still had Perpich up by four points.

On the night of November 7, 1978, the most optimistic IR, Jerry Knickerbocker, thought they might pick up 25 House seats. When it was all over, they picked up 32 for a 67-67 tie. “[W]e couldn’t believe the actual numbers when they started to come in,” IR House Minority Leader Henry Savelkoul said, adding, “We won seats that I didn’t think we had a chance to win.” Furthermore, Quie, Boschwitz, and Durenberger all won. It was the first time the party had held all three offices since 1948.

“Minnesota is [a] two-party state again,” the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* wrote. “The IR seemed all but dead. Now it has been revived dramatically.” Another commentator wrote that a year earlier, “some observers wondered whether Minnesota was approaching the status of a modified one-party state. After all, the DFL held all state elective offices and a majority in both state houses. The 1978 election dramatically changed that picture.”

In November 1978, the IRs had, no doubt, been greatly helped by external factors; general weariness with DFL rule, divisions, a series of gross political errors in that party, and a generally conservative mood in the country. But Marsie Leier was right to worry about the party blowing it. The progressive and conservative wings of Minnesota’s Republican Party realized they couldn’t win without each other and presented a unified, competent front. And, when the campaign came, they played their hand well. Political tides can turn quickly: It was just seven years from the Minnesota DFL’s “miracle” to its “massacre.” ★

Hennepin County Library and Hennepin History Museum

≡ PUBLIC POLICY

No Justice, **NO PEACE**

New state initiatives masquerading as criminal justice reform will actually subvert it.



BY DAVID ZIMMER

At a time when legitimate concerns exist regarding whether Minnesota is doing enough to hold criminal offenders accountable, Minnesota’s Legislature and the Executive branch have created several extrajudicial mechanisms that serve to revisit convictions, commute sentences, and shorten or eliminate non-custodial supervision imposed by our courts. The reasoning behind these progressive-led initiatives came from a belief that the criminal justice system was too punitive, especially involving people of color and juvenile offenders.

The narrative behind these reforms serves to impugn the historical processes for seeking relief from a conviction or sentence. It undermines our established judicial appeals and executive pardon processes. These processes are intentionally limited in number and scope as judicial convictions are meant to be final.

The newly proposed mechanisms serve as an “end around” of our court system, further discrediting and undermining judicial authority.

Justice is more readily achieved when we focus our finite resources and attention on the tens of thousands of unsolved violent crimes, the tens of thousands of crime victims, and the tens of thousands of active arrest warrants in Minnesota at any given moment. Progressives have shown they are far more concerned with the effects of enforcement on offenders rather than the effect a lack of justice has on victims.

How we got here

In the mid-1990s Minnesota experienced a significant rise in violent crime. So notable that *The New York Times* rechristened Minneapolis with the moniker “Murderapolis.” This notorious crime era ended when the collective criminal justice system fought back with the backing of citizens and political leadership. Through relentless enforcement and prosecution of offenders, Minnesota experienced a sustained drop in crime, and crime victims experienced a high degree of justice.

For the next 22 years, crime was kept

under control. But by the mid-2010s, progressives began to call for changes in our response to crime. They cited “over-incarceration,” “over-policing,” and “systemic racism” as some of the ills born out of the aggressive response to crime. Reformists saw an opportunity ripe for re-introducing their long-awaited criminal justice reform efforts.

Then, in 2020, the civil unrest following the death of George Floyd ripped the lid off any measured level of debate or rollout of reform efforts. Narratives of over-policing, over-incarceration, and systemic racism became integrated into every policy decision seemingly overnight.

Hostility towards law enforcement

The newly proposed mechanisms serve as an “end around” of our court system, further discrediting and undermining judicial authority.

and the criminal justice system was overwhelming, and sadly, far too many civic leaders were willing to self-flagellate to appease the activists and reformists.

Criminals responded quickly to this attack on our criminal justice system, recognizing softer and more lenient consequences for criminal acts, and we have been paying the price ever since.

Effects of the DFL trifecta during the past session

Once the 2023 session opened with Democrats controlling all three branches of the State government, there was a torrent of criminal justice system reform bills pushed through with limited discussion, debate, or amendments. Much of the following legislation received significant attention, but will have little or no impact on improving public safety or reducing crime:

- Decriminalization of marijuana and drug paraphernalia
- Gun control measures, including red flag laws and expanded background checks
- Creating new laws to define carjacking and retail theft
- Adding bias provisions to several existing offenses
- Restricting the use of No-Knock search warrants by police

Nevertheless, the Legislative leadership and Gov. Tim Walz were ecstatic with their progress. In a July 2023 *Arnold Ventures* article by Kaitlin Menza, House Majority Leader Jamie Long (DFL-Minneapolis) said, “This was a huge win. We had a number of provisions in the public safety budget bill that we had been working on for many, many years, and I think it is a transformational bill for public safety reform for Minnesota.”

Lesser-known reforms with significant impact

While those legislative reforms received most of the attention, some lesser-known and more complex reforms will have a more consequential impact on our public safety by weakening accountability across the board.

These reform measures have been created in recent years legislatively or through executive action and have quietly altered our public safety landscape for the worse.

As the *Minnesota Reformer’s* Deena Winter described in June, some of the legislation passed in 2023 was likely to “result in scores of people being released from prison sooner; shorter terms of probation or community supervision; erasure of some aiding and abetting felony convictions and reduction in sentences of others; and easier expungement of certain non-violent crimes.”

What follows is a description of progressive programs and mechanisms that were adopted and now serve as extrajudicial means to reduce accountability for Minnesota’s criminal offenders.

Office of Restorative Practices

Created by the 2023 Legislature as part of “reforms” to Minnesota’s juvenile justice system. Nearly all the provisions serve to divert juvenile criminals away from juvenile court or juvenile detention and into alternative, community-based and “restorative” measures. DFL Rep. Sandra Feist, who sits on the Public Safety and Judiciary Committees and is described as one of the architects of this effort, did not try to hide the intent as quoted in the *Star Tribune*: “These changes are absolutely transformative... They are about wresting power to some degree from local judges and prosecutors and entrusting it with our communities.”

Automatic Expungements

A significant part of the marijuana legalization effort in 2023 centered not only on its legalization but also on expunging criminal histories involving marijuana offenses, thereby removing the “stigma” associated with a criminal conviction. For most misdemeanor offenses, the expungement process will be automatic, and for more serious convictions, the convicted person must initiate the expungement process.

Prosecutor-Initiated Sentence Review

A new law giving prosecutors the authority to revisit and re-examine cases and seek re-sentencing for defendants who were prosecuted in the past. This is another example of undermining the existing adversarial system that is governed by the balance provided when a prosecutor acts on behalf of the public, and the defense attorney acts on behalf of the defendant.

Clemency Review Commission

This new commission will increase both the number of petitions screened for the Board of Pardons and the number of people receiving pardons or sentence commutations.

Board of Pardons

The Minnesota Constitution allows for convicted persons to apply for relief from the Board of Pardons, which consists of the governor, attorney general, and the chief judge of the Supreme Court.

Prior to 2023, the Board of Pardons required a unanimous vote in favor of the applicant to pardon or commute a sentence. The 2023 Legislature voted to change Minnesota’s rules to allow for a two-thirds majority vote if the governor was part of the majority. While this puts Minnesota on par with other states that do not require a majority vote, it is expected to significantly increase the number of extrajudicial pardons or sentence commutations.

Supervision Abatement

The 2023 Legislature created the Supervised Release Board. This Board, like the Clemency Review Commission, is designed to increase the number of probation cases reviewed for early release and final discharge decisions.

Felony Murder Resentencing

This new law will serve to re-sentence people who have been convicted of aiding and abetting murder but were not a “major participant” in the murder. By law, the Department of Corrections will be notifying individuals who qualify for this resentencing.

Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act

The 2023 Legislature created an “Early Release Incentive” for prison inmates, reducing time behind bars to 50 percent of a sentence, down from 66 percent. The act also created “Earned Supervision Abatement.” This shortens the period of community supervision for parolees if they meet the goals of their release plan. It also caps probation at a maximum of five years.

Sentencing Guidelines Commission

The 2023 Legislature added or “stacked” the commission with two commissioners. The appointment process was also

changed to give the governor more authority over appointments. The Legislature also funded a comprehensive review of the sentencing guidelines, which is viewed by many as the start of the systematic reduction of penalties that have been historically set by the Commission.

Conviction Review Unit

Perhaps the most problematic reform mechanism is the attorney general’s Conviction Review Unit (CRU). This extra-judicial mechanism offers convicted persons a new form of potential relief from the conviction they received in the court system.

In August 2021, Atty. Gen. Keith Ellison announced the creation of the CRU within his office. The CRU is a full-time unit operating in partnership with the Great North Innocence Project. The endeavor has been heavily funded by federal grants in the initial stages. It is one of only four such units nationally to reside in a state AG’s office. The number of conviction review units across the U.S. has expanded considerably in recent years, from approximately 30 in 2018 to around 100 today.

The CRU’s charter proudly states that it was modeled after a special directive from L.A. County District Attorney George Gascon, a national figure in the progressive prosecutor movement. This emulation of West Coast progressive policies is cause for concern.

According to the Great North Innocence Project, “The purpose of the CRU is to prevent, identify, and remedy wrongful convictions.”

It is telling that the AG’s own charter acknowledges the CRU is an “extrajudicial” process. *Webster’s Dictionary* defines “extrajudicial” as 1)



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“not forming a valid part of regular legal proceedings,” 2) “delivered without legal authority,” and 3) “done in contravention of due process of law.”

In his report “Overstating America’s Wrongful Conviction Rate?” Prof. Paul G. Cassell of Quinney College of Law at the University of Utah clearly established the national rate of innocent people being wrongly convicted at between .016 percent and .062 percent. Putting this figure into useful context, Cassell concluded that a U.S. citizen was 30,000 times more likely to become a victim of violent crime than to be wrongfully convicted and sent to prison for a violent crime he or she did not commit.

Despite this extreme rarity, of which an appropriate judicial remedy of appeal already exists, Minnesota has decided to invest energy and resources in overturning convictions, commuting sentences, and reducing accountability for those found guilty by our judicial system.

Throughout our state’s history, we have invested in and valued a robust and credible court system. That system has allowed for appeals that have merit. Those appeals go through an appropriate adversarial process where each side is represented, and an impartial group of judges make decisions based on the law — not emotion or public opinion.

Expanding the number of groups that now “re-investigate” cases that have already been adjudicated only serves to undermine the legitimacy and authority we have rightly bestowed upon our court system. These efforts are often fueled by emotion and take advantage of the misguided notion that it is appropriate to apply today’s morality and conventions to decisions made in the past.

The emotional aspect of these “re-investigations” leaves the results vulnerable to subjective whim rather than an established process based on fact, as does the tendency to give more credibility to new information than information vetted contemporaneously with the events of the case. These tendencies make for good theater, but they make for poor public policy

in determining whether justice was appropriately meted out decades earlier.

The Myon Burrell murder case is a striking example. In 2002, Burrell, a gang member who shot at a rival gang member, accidentally killed an 11-year-old girl in Minneapolis. Over the course of several years, Burrell was tried and convicted by two separate district courts and had several appeals via the Court



Minnesota has decided to invest energy and resources in overturning convictions, commuting sentences, and reducing accountability for those found guilty by our judicial system.

of Appeals and the Minnesota Supreme Court. At the end of this rigorous and exhaustive judicial process — during which Burrell had multiple opportunities for relief — the justice system stood resolved that Burrell was guilty and that justice required him to serve a minimum of 45 years to life in prison.

The county attorneys at the time of Burrell’s two trials were Amy Klobuchar and Mike Freeman. Both cited Burrell as an example of their tough-on-crime approach to law enforcement, so long as it was politically expedient.

Activists had been lobbying politicians for years calling for a re-examination of Burrell’s case. They also persuaded an *Associated Press* reporter to examine the case, which resulted in a lengthy investigative piece published in 2019

calling into question Burrell’s conviction, largely based on purported changes of heart by key witnesses years after the conviction.

Despite years of prominently defending and touting her role in Burrell’s conviction, Klobuchar appeared to reverse course with the political winds, calling for a re-investigation of the case in the midst of her 2019 candidacy for president.

Freeman reacted similarly, and while he has professed to never doubt Burrell’s guilt, he made an offer to the court to dismiss 15 years of Burrell’s sentence.

Ellison and Walz went further. Ellison assembled a group to review Burrell’s case. This group recommended forming an official conviction review unit as they could not properly assess Burrell’s guilt or innocence. However, the group did offer a revealing opinion: “We concluded that no fundamental goal of sentencing is served by Burrell’s continued incarceration.”

The statement was what Ellison and Walz needed. In December 2020, they joined together as two-thirds of the Minnesota Board of Pardons (the Chief Justice abstained from voting) and commuted Burrell’s sentence to 20 years, with the final two years to be served under community supervision. Burrell walked out of Stillwater Prison that day. He has since been arrested and charged with possessing both a firearm and felony amounts of controlled substances in August 2023.

The consequences

Altogether, these reforms were designed to reduce time in custody, reduce any form of supervision period, and eliminate the “burden” of a criminal history for Minnesotans convicted of a crime.

These reforms will further undermine a justice system struggling to hold offenders accountable. Consequently, we risk returning to an era of high crime while institutional trust in the criminal justice system falls further into decay. No amount of bureaucratic and extrajudicial layers can match the crime-fighting resolve of blind justice — for both criminals and victims. ★



The
THINKING
MINNESOTA
POLL



UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

A closer look at the beliefs and views
of a few 'typical' Minnesotans.

BY BILL WALSH

Thinking Minnesota magazine conducted our very first poll back in August 2018, asking national polling firm Meeting Street Insights to survey 500 Minnesotans with 25 questions about education, crime, and the economy. Since that time, 20 additional polls have been conducted asking hundreds of questions to 10,500 different Minnesotans around the state and across demographics. While brainstorming for our next project, the editors at *Thinking Minnesota* came up with a novel idea: What if instead of conducting another poll, we looked back at all the data acquired in the previous 21 polls and developed a snapshot of Minnesota?

The first step was to combine the data from these 21 polls

into one massive file ready for analysis. Next, we used the data to create indices for the 10,500 Minnesotans who took our surveys over the years: who they are, their political affiliation, their perception of the economy, how much they trust the media, where they get their information, and how they feel about taxes, education, energy, crime, and social issues. Five distinct profiles of Minnesotans arose from the data, and we are pleased to present them here.

There are two important caveats to consider. First, purists in polling methodology will be quick to point out the inherent scientific flaws of combining surveys over a five-year period. We agree and advise readers to consume the data with this in mind.



TACONITE TIM



Taconite Tim represents the people living on the Iron Range in Northeast Minnesota. Tim's grandfather and father worked in the mines, but those opportunities no longer exist so he became an EMT and teaches at the high school. Tim likes to hunt, fish, and snowmobile, and he calls tourists from the Twin Cities "612ers" or "citiots."

IRON RANGERS WHO THEY ARE

- Older (55 percent are ages 55+)
- Do not have a college degree (70 percent)
- Much more Republican (48 percent) than Democrat (33 percent) and Range Democrats are older, which explains the recent shift in voting patterns
- More conservative (50 percent) compared to all Minnesota voters (35 percent) with only 17 percent liberal

HOW THEY FEEL

- Pessimistic about the state's direction and the governor leading it: 54 percent say the state is on the wrong track and only 46 percent approve of Gov. Tim Walz's job performance
- Worried about the future: 55 percent say their personal financial situation is fair or poor
- Distrustful of the media compared to Minnesota as a whole: 86 percent say Minnesota media contributes to polarization

55%
say their
personal
financial
situation
is fair
or poor

WHAT THEY BELIEVE

- More fiscally conservative as nearly a majority (45 percent) say 31 percent or more of state spending is wasteful, and eight in 10 (82 percent) oppose a gas tax
- More likely to give Minnesota's public schools a lower grade
- A majority (55 percent) believe accountability should come before increased education funding
- Trust parents over teachers and principals when it comes to curriculum (the opposite is true among voters statewide)
- Socially conservative: 80 percent oppose the new abortion law and 93 percent oppose sex change operations for minors
- Opposed to Walz's 2040 renewable energy plan
- Tough on crime: they favor strengthening mandatory minimums (81 percent)

While each individual survey had a margin of error of +/-4.38 percent, that can't be said for the combined data file. Second, not all Minnesotans fit neatly into the five profiles showcased in this exercise. Winnowing down the profiles to just five was one of the toughest challenges of the entire project.

So, which one are you? Taconite Tim, MAGA Marv, Apathetic Andy, Subaru Suzy, or the Trade School Thompsons? ★

About the pollster

Rob Autry, founder of Meeting Street Insights, is one of the nation's leading pollsters and research strategists.



SUBARU SUZY

Suzy represents liberals living in Minneapolis and St. Paul. She has short, prematurely gray hair and drives a Subaru station wagon with a Planned Parenthood bumper sticker. She still wears a mask and shops at Whole Foods with recycled shopping bags.

URBAN LIBERALS WHO THEY ARE

- Younger (64 percent are under the age of 55)
- College educated (55 percent are college grads compared to 45 percent for the state)
- Strongly Democrat: 42 percent identify as a “Strong Democrat” — nearly 20 points higher than the state
- Not surprisingly, ideologically liberal (50 percent), with one in three saying they are politically “very liberal” (32 percent)

HOW THEY FEEL

- Optimistic about Minnesota: 68 percent believe the state is headed in the right direction and 71 percent approve of Walz
- Worried about their finances but don’t blame taxes: 56 percent say Minnesota’s tax rates are about right
- Trust the media and get their news online

WHAT THEY BELIEVE

- Strong supporters of K-12 schools and support more funding and trust teachers
- Woke: 70 percent support an ethnic studies requirement, 67 percent oppose a gender identity ban, 81 percent support driver’s licenses for illegals, and 67 percent support restoring voting rights for felons
- More liberal on social issues, particularly abortion: 84 percent support Minnesota’s new abortion law
- Wholeheartedly support Walz’s renewable energy plan (80 percent)
- Most feel safe in Minneapolis (70 percent compared with 47 percent statewide) and want to loosen the reins on crime policy

80%
wholeheartedly
support Walz’s
renewable
energy plan



APATHETIC ANDY

Andy represents self-described independent men across Minnesota. He believes both parties are generally worthless at solving problems and making his life better. Andy needs a compelling local issue or strong candidate in order to vote. Andy disagrees with his wife on many important issues.

INDEPENDENT MEN WHO THEY ARE

- Middle-aged (43 percent are ages 35-54 – 8 points higher than the state)
- Some college: most Independent Men do not have a college diploma (52 percent), statistically matching the state
- Politically moderate
- Different than Independent Women: Independent Women tend to be older and more educated (52 percent have college degrees)

HOW THEY FEEL

- Apathetic at best, slightly pessimistic at worst, they tend to be mixed on both the direction of the state (48 percent right direction versus 44 percent on the wrong track) and Walz’s job performance (46 percent approve versus 39 percent disapprove)
- Different than Independent Women who approve of Walz by large margins (62 percent approve and 19 percent disapprove)
- Generally content with their personal financial situation but concerned about taxes: 62 percent say Minnesota tax rates are too high
- More cynical compared to the overall electorate and Independent Women
- Follow the news and current events closely and listen to the radio

WHAT THEY BELIEVE

- Harder on K-12 education than Independent Women, trust parents over teachers, want accountability
- Slightly more conservative on social issues, particularly when it comes to abortion and sex change operations (50 percent oppose the new abortion law)
- Oppose Walz’s alternative energy plan (51 percent) and new California-based emissions standards while Independent Women hold more support
- Concerned about crime in Minnesota (77 percent) and favor strengthening mandatory minimums and a three-strikes law



TRADE SCHOOL THOMPSONS

The Thompsons represent people in the outer-ring suburbs without a college education. Mr. Thompson drives a newer Ford F-150 while Mrs. Thompson rocks a minivan. He works in HVAC, making over \$100k; she works as a medical technician at the local clinic. They did not go to college but their kids probably will.

NON-COLLEGE SUBURBANITES

WHO THEY ARE

- Older (53 percent are ages 55+)
- Nearly half have some college education (46 percent)
- Politically split: closely matching the rest of the state, but more conservative than their neighbors with a college degree
- Lived in Minnesota longer than their higher-educated, suburban neighbors

HOW THEY FEEL

- Fairly content: 50 percent say the state is headed in the right direction with 52 percent approving of the job Walz is doing as governor
- Pessimistic about economic issues: 46 percent describe their personal financial situation as only fair or poor
- Less trusting of the media than their college-educated neighbors

WHAT THEY BELIEVE

- Fiscally in line with the state as a whole, though notably more opposed to the gas tax
- Less supportive of the K-12 education system than their college-educated neighbors (78 percent support school choice)
- Generally more right of center on social issues: 52 percent oppose the new abortion law and 63 percent oppose sex change operations for minors
- Concerned about crime and safety (85 percent) with 78 percent supporting a three-strikes law



MAGA MARV

Marv represents conservatives living in rural Minnesota. Marv is fiscally and socially conservative and not afraid to tell you about it during the meat raffle at the VFW. Has a “Let’s Go Brandon” bumper sticker on his GMC pickup and attends church regularly.

RURAL CONSERVATIVES

WHO THEY ARE

- Older: only 28 percent are ages 18-44 and 50 percent are ages 55+
- Male (55 percent compared to 48 percent for the state)
- Working class: only 29 percent have a college degree compared to 45 percent of voters statewide
- Republican: 76 percent are Republican with 45 percent identifying as “Strongly Republican”
- Deeply rooted in Minnesota: 81 percent say they have lived in Minnesota all their lives

HOW THEY FEEL

- Negative and incredibly pessimistic, they believe Minnesota has lost its way under Walz’s leadership (72 percent wrong track with 71 percent disapproving of Walz)
- Satisfied with their personal finances (66 percent excellent or good), but negative about the rest of the economy
- Skeptical of the media (83 percent say Minnesota reporters misrepresent the facts)

WHAT THEY BELIEVE

- Full-fledged fiscal conservatives who strongly believe tax rates are too high (80 percent)
- Skeptical of the K-12 education system: they trust parents over teachers and believe accountability should be a prerequisite to increased funding
- Socially conservative (80 percent oppose the new abortion law and 93 percent oppose sex change operations for minors)
- Opposed to Walz’s 2040 renewable energy plan
- Tough on crime: 81 percent favor strengthening mandatory minimums



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Urban Liberals and Rural Conservatives think and behave exactly as expected
- The polling confirms the recent trend of Iron Rangers becoming increasingly conservative
- Suburban voters are not a monolithic bloc: their attitudes vary based on the amount of college education attained
- Independents (especially independent men) are waiting to be inspired by a candidate, party, or movement that can show the system can work for them

≡ SOCIETY

SOCIAL CAPITAL CONUNDRUM

Why are Minnesota and its neighbors alike?

BY JOHN PHELAN



This article is an adaptation of John Phelan's 2023 report "The X Factor? Social capital and economic well-being: A quantitative analysis."

Minnesota and its neighbors operate a range of different economic policies. Our state imposes some of the highest income taxes in the United States, ranking 43rd on the Tax Foundation's State Business Tax Climate Index for 2019; South Dakota, by contrast, imposes no income tax and ranks 3rd. And yet, both states see similar, high outcomes for the share of the population employed. In 2019, Minnesota ranked 3rd in the United States and South Dakota ranked 5th.

There is, then, something besides state government policy driving these high rates of employment. And, given the statistically significant and positive relationship across states between the employment ratio and a standard measure of economic well-being like median household income, this "something" also plays a role in driving economic well-being. If we want to understand why some states have higher levels of economic well-being than others, it seems important to identify and understand this "something." That is what we do in American Experiment's new report "The X-Factor? Social capital and economic well-being: A quantitative analysis."

The suspect: Social capital

While much of my time is spent analyzing economic outcomes, economics doesn't operate in a vacuum; cultural, societal, and economic conditions often converge in ways that are difficult to quantify. One day, I saw a report titled "The Geography of Social Capital in America," which contained a map of the United States denoted by each state's level of "social capital." I was struck by the apparent overlap between states with high employment ratios and states with higher levels of social capital. It was more than apparent: Levels of social capital are statistically significantly and positively related to levels of employment. Is social capital that "something"?

What is social capital? Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam did more than anyone to popularize the concept with his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In it, he defined social capital as "connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." Networks and norms, in other words. The academic John Field elaborates: "The

more people you know [networks], and the more you share a common outlook with them [norms], the richer you are in social capital."

Why would higher levels of social capital enhance economic well-being? Consider a key ingredient of social capital: trust. People are more likely to do business with people they trust than with people they do not. And, if they do business with people they do not trust, they are likely to do so only at a higher "transaction cost," insisting on reassurances they would not insist on with a person they trust. This is why, for example, a country like Italy, which has relatively low levels of trust for a rich country, sees a higher share of family-owned businesses; these are the only people you can trust. This imposes an economic cost, however. If you are only looking to your family for people to deal with, you are drawing on a much smaller pool and will exclude many qualified people. Indeed, a large body of empirical literature has found that higher levels of social capital in a community are associated with higher levels of employment and a greater ability for entrepreneurs to identify and exploit business opportunities and access financing.

"Networks" are quantitative and neutral, in that they can be put to uses that are either socially beneficial — like the Lions Club — or socially harmful, like the Mafia. Membership of both increases "the [number of] people you know," but while many would argue that membership of the former was a positive for society overall, few would make that argument about membership of the latter.

"Norms" are qualitative and *non-neutral*. While the number of people you know can be either a good thing or a bad thing, socially speaking, *from the point of view of economic well-being* — no moral judgment is made here — some norms are better than others. The economist Oded Galor writes in his recent book *The Journey of Humanity: The Origins of Wealth and Inequality*:

Cultural traits — the shared values, norms, beliefs and preferences that prevail in a society and are transmitted across the generations — have often made a significant impact on a society's development process. In particular, aspects of culture that dispose populations towards or away from the maintenance of strong family ties, interpersonal trust, individualism, future

orientation and investment in human capital have considerable long-term economic implications.

The trial:

Exploring the link between social capital and economic well-being in America

We established a relationship between higher levels of social capital and higher levels of employment. We also established a relationship between higher levels of employment and higher levels of economic well-being, measured by median household income. What, then, is the direct relationship between levels of social capital and levels of median household income?

Our hypothesis is that a higher level of social capital in an area is associated with higher levels of economic well-being. The null hypothesis to be tested is, then, that there is no relationship between levels of social capital and median household income.

First, one must quantify social capital, and that is no easy task. Several attempts have been made at the state level, starting with Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, but these often rely on responses to surveys designed to get the views of the average American, not the average resident of a particular state. More recently, others define social capital rather narrowly, focusing mostly on Putnamesque measures of “cohesiveness” like membership of, yes, bowling centers.

Which brings us back to “The Geography of Social Capital in America,” produced by the Social Capital Project, which is run by the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. They created an index of social capital at both the state and county level. They have a broad definition:

In our understanding of social capital, close and nurturing relationships with other people almost self-evidently provide benefits. Therefore social capital is likely to be “greater” or more productive in families, communities, and organizations with an abundance of close, supportive relationships.



A large body of empirical literature has found that higher levels of social capital in a community are associated with higher levels of employment and a greater ability for entrepreneurs to identify and exploit business opportunities and access financing.

Social capital is also likely to be reflected in cooperative activities. These activities may be informal (e.g. conversing or working together with neighbors), or formal (e.g. membership in groups or service on a committee). Some cooperative activities may be formalized in institutions (e.g. governments, schools, news media, corporations), including nonprofit organizations specifically meant to deliver benefits or to represent interests. Social capital is also reflected in trust in other people, confidence in institutions, mutual generosity, high collective efficacy, and low social disorganization. In our view, places where these features of social life come together have “high,” or “more,” or more productive social capital — features of social life that provide benefits to community and family members. Places with a dearth of these

features have “low,” or “less,” or less productive social capital.

Even better, the indexes have sub-indices so we can look beneath the relationship between social capital and economic well-being and at the relationship between various components of social capital and economic well-being. To test our hypothesis, we use the county-level index, which gives us 2,897 observations.

The four sub-indices — the explanatory (factor/independent) variables in our analysis — are: Family Unity, which comprises “the share of births that are to unwed mothers,” “the percentage of children living in families headed by a single parent,” and “the percentage of women ages 35-44 who are married (and not separated)”; Community Health, which comprises “non-religious nonprofits per capita,” “congregations per capita,” and “the informal civil society subindex”; Institutional Health, which comprises “presidential voting rates,” “census response rates,” and “the confidence subindex”; and Collective Efficacy, which comprises “the violent crime rate.”

Our measure of economic well-being — our response (outcome/dependent) variable — is the median



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household income for each county. We also include controls for county size and metropolitan status.

The results of our multiple panel regression measuring the impact of our four explanatory variables — the components of social capital at the county level — and our controls for county size and metropolitan status on levels of median household income show that three of them have both statistically significant and positive relationships: Community Health, Institutional Health, and Family Unity. We can reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship. Hitherto, results from the research into the relationship between levels of social capital and economic well-being at the macro-level have been, according to Field, “suggestive rather than conclusive.” Our results make less suggestive and more conclusive the case that higher levels of social capital are associated with greater economic well-being at the macro-level.

The sentence:

Can policy build social capital?

Having found a statistically significant and positive relationship between levels of social capital and economic well-being, we can ask whether policy can grow social capital with the aim of boosting economic well-being.

There is a great deal of skepticism among social capital scholars on this point. They argue that social capital evolves, it is not created. For Putnam, the development of social capital was unplanned; it is a “by-product of singing groups and soccer clubs.”

In addition, are these relationships between components of social capital and economic well-being causal? When we look at Institutional Health, for example, research tends to suggest that people vote in presidential elections at higher rates because they are rich, not that they are rich because they vote at higher rates.

Even where a causal link is clearer, as with Community Health, there is debate about the exact state of social capital in America. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam famously argued that social capital in the United States was in precipitous decline, pointing to declining rates of membership in voluntary associations,

rates of voting, newspaper readership, reciprocal helpfulness, sociability, trust, and trustworthiness while identifying television as the leading cause. Others argued that social capital was not declining, it was simply changing. “Rather than joining groups in our neighborhoods, like bowling leagues” the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development writes, “we’re now joining groups made up of people who share our beliefs — fighting for environmental protection or gay rights, for instance — rather than our locality. These groups — such as a branch of Greenpeace or Amnesty International — can exist in the ‘real’ world. But they may also exist only virtually on the Internet, which is arguably creating whole new ‘communities’ of people who may never physically meet but who share common values and interests.”

Our results make less suggestive and more conclusive the case that higher levels of social capital are associated with greater economic well-being at the macro-level.

Putnam, in response, argues that this is a poor substitute for older forms of social capital.

For our third statistically significant and positive variable, Family Unity, however, the causal link is clear, and so is the situation in America.

The share of married adults has plummeted (“the percentage of women ages 35-44 who are married” in our sub-indices) and the declines have been greatest among those Americans with lower incomes and those belonging to minority ethnic communities, with the notable exception of Asian Americans. This decline in two-earner households has exerted a downward pressure on household incomes, especially among those Americans who have seen higher rates of “family fragmentation,” driving

increased rates of income inequality.

More important is the explosion in single parenthood (“the share of births that are to unwed mothers” and “the percentage of children living in families headed by a single parent”). Between 1980 and 2019, the share of children in the United States who lived with married parents fell from 77 percent to 63 percent. More than one in five American children now live in a home with a mother who is neither married nor cohabiting. As economist Melissa S. Kearney writes in her book *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*, single parents have both less time and, on average, less income to devote to their children than married parents, with the result that the children of single parents are more likely to struggle at school and later in life. Again, these declines have been greater among those Americans with lower incomes and those belonging to minority ethnic communities, again with the notable exception of Asian Americans, again contributing to increased income inequality.

Research offers two leading causes. One is a decline in “marriageable men” as the decline of manufacturing employment removes a source of well-paid work for unskilled men making them less appealing as marriage partners. The other is a change in social norms, “away from the maintenance of strong family ties,” in Galor’s words. What can policy do about either of those?

This decline in a key component of social capital been described as “the biggest problem we have,” “the largest or second-largest problem in America,” and the “shadow behind all sorts of other problems that people are much more easily conversant about.” With new books from prominent social scientists such as Kearney and Richard V. Reeves as well as a forthcoming book by Brad Wilcox, “family fragmentation” — the opposite of Family Unity — is earning much attention. Having been a focus of Center of the American Experiment since its founding in 1990, we are well-placed to contribute. If our new report offers more problems than solutions, that is a vital first step. ★



This article is an adaptation of Martha Njolomole's 2024 report "A Ticking Time Bomb: Minnesota's vast and expanding welfare system."



GOVERNMENT

THE

TIME BOMB

BY MARTHA NJOLOMOLE

The consequences of Minnesota's ballooning welfare system.

Transformational, but how?

A variety of words have been used to describe the 2023 Minnesota legislative session. Depending on which side of the political aisle you place yourself, the session was either "bonkers" or "transformational." There is no denying, however, that the session was nothing short of extraordinary. Nowhere is that more evident than with the historic expansion of Minnesota's welfare system.

To be clear, the state's welfare system wasn't exactly modest to begin with. In the most recently ended two-year budgeting period between 2022 and 2023, for instance, 29 percent of the state budget went to Health and Human Services (HHS), most of it to fund numerous assistance programs administered by the Department of Human Services. And among the myriad public services on which the state spends

money, HHS was, in fact, the state's second biggest expenditure, surpassed only by E-12 education. HHS was the biggest expenditure, taking nearly half of all spending if we include money coming from the federal government.

But in the last session, under the claim of reducing costs for the most disadvantaged, Gov. Tim Walz and the DFL-controlled legislature used a portion of Minnesota's staggering \$18 billion

TABLE 1:
Actual and projected share of General Fund
spending by category (FY2018-FY2027)

Spending Category	2018-19 (Actual)	2020-21 (Actual)	2022-23 (Actual)	2024-25 (Forecast)	2026-27 (Forecast)
E-12 Education	41%	42%	39%	35%	38%
Higher Education	7%	7%	7%	6%	6%
Property Tax Aids and Credits	8%	8%	9%	8%	7%
Health and Human Services	29%	29%	29%	30%	35%
Public Safety and Corrections	3%	3%	4%	5%	5%
Environment, Ag and Housing	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Economic & Workforce Development	1%	1%	2%	6%	1%
Transportation	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%
General Government	5%	6%	5%	4%	2%

Source: Minnesota Management and Budget

surplus to ramp up welfare spending to an unprecedented level. As a share of the budget, HHS is expected to consume over a third of the state budget by the 2026-2027 budgeting cycle as shown in Table 1.

In dollar terms, Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB) recently estimated that HHS will grow by nearly \$6 billion — or 40 percent — in the 2024-25 biennium compared to what it was in the 2022-23 biennium as shown in Figure 1. Spending will further increase by nearly another \$8 billion — about 50 percent — in the 2026-27 biennium compared to the 2022-23 biennium. Put another way, in the four years covering the 2024 to 2027 fiscal years, \$42 in every \$100 of new spending in the budget will be allocated to HHS, making it the primary driver of growth within the state budget.

Minnesota’s welfare system has indeed undergone a “historic” expansion. But is that worth celebrating?

Transformative — but for better, or worse?

Compared to most states, Minnesota has historically had a generous welfare system. As a matter of fact, when Pres. Bill Clinton signed the Personal

Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, declaring “the end of welfare as we know it,” Minnesota had long been experimenting with its own generous program to move people from welfare to work — the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP).

The idea that government should prioritize moving people on welfare to work had taken root much earlier than 1996, both at the federal level and among most states. PRWORA itself was a culmination of work that started in the 1960s under John F. Kennedy, transforming the country’s main cash assistance program — Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) — from an entitlement program to one that required recipients to work, otherwise known as a “workfare” program. The most significant change is probably what came in 1981 when states were given the authority to establish their own “welfare-to-work” programs. From this, MFIP was idealized a few years later.

Minnesotans who had joined MFIP while it was in its pilot phase between 1994 and 1998 were especially lucky. While many states seemingly adopted a punitive approach to moving people off welfare, MFIP stood out for what many have described as a “compassionate”

approach. The program combined strong work requirements with financial incentives and strong work supports, investing in job counselors, providing childcare to working parents, and helping with transportation. And, unlike AFDC, MFIP also let participants keep more of their incomes once they started working.

Since PRWORA effectively transformed AFDC into TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and required that all states adopt some strict “welfare to work” programs to move welfare recipients into the workforce, MFIP shed some of its generosity partly to comply with new federal rules as it was converted from a pilot into a statewide program beginning in 1998. Still, Minnesota remained noticeably more generous than other states even after PRWORA.

According to the Urban Institute, for

Gov. Tim Walz and the DFL-controlled legislature used a portion of Minnesota’s staggering \$18 billion surplus to ramp up welfare spending to an unprecedented level.

example, during the period between 1996 and 2000, Minnesota provided higher-than-average income benefits to TANF recipients, had a higher share of children in poverty receiving welfare, had a lower share of children without health insurance, had higher income cutoffs for its Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and had a higher income cut-off for childcare subsidy eligibility. And while in the two years between 1997 and 1999 welfare caseloads for cash assistance had declined by 42 percent after the passage of PRWORA, in Minnesota, the decline

was only 30 percent.

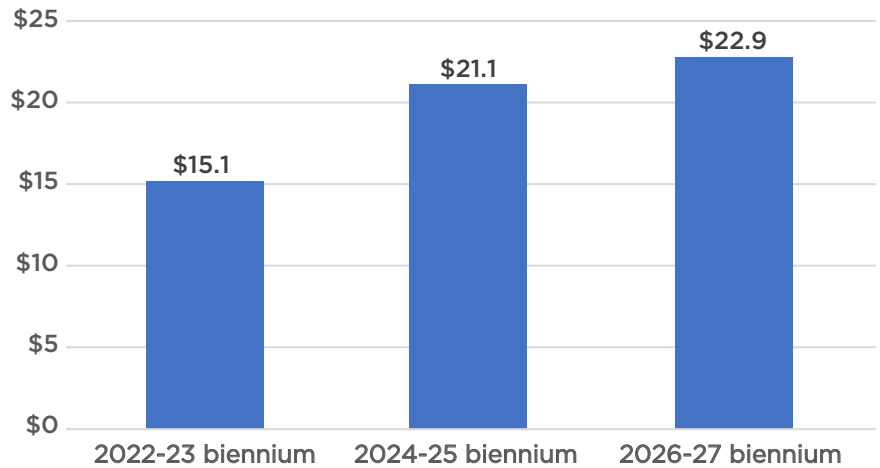
Comparatively, Minnesota spends a bigger share of its budget on welfare programs than the rest of the country. Even after adjusting for the population in poverty, Minnesota ranks at the top when it comes to welfare spending. In 2019, for example, U.S. Census Bureau data shows that Minnesota spent an equivalent of \$34,379 on public welfare per person in poverty. This is the third-highest spending rate among the 50 states, only behind Massachusetts and Alaska. The median state, on the other hand, only spent half that amount.

But even for a state as generous as Minnesota, the 2023 legislative session marked a stark departure from the traditional mantra that has long shaped welfare policy in the United States

In the four years covering the 2024 to 2027 fiscal years, \$42 in every \$100 of new spending in the budget will be allocated to HHS, making it the primary driver of growth within the state budget.

since the Clinton era: Welfare should not be a way of life, but rather a second chance. Unlike the reforms that came with PRWORA, which championed work and aimed to reduce poverty while also reducing dependence, the 2023 legislative session took Minnesota backward, prioritizing more spending above anything else. Eligibility limits for numerous programs have been loosened, widening the safety net for those not in dire need. Benefits were made more generous paired with eased income and work requirements for cash assistance. Lawmakers effectively paved the way for a larger swath of Minnesotans to

FIGURE 1
Actual and projected HHS General Fund spending by end of session (in billion \$)



Source: Minnesota Management and Budget

enter the welfare system and remain in it for extended periods.

What happened in the legislative session

Take MinnesotaCare, for example. Historically, the program has provided subsidized health insurance coverage strictly to individuals whose incomes make them ineligible for Medicaid but is less than double the official poverty line. Last session, however, lawmakers passed a law that would potentially open the program to people with higher incomes beginning in 2027 (pending federal approval and other provisions) under what they call a “public option.” Lawmakers have also extended MinnesotaCare eligibility to undocumented immigrants, an option that will cost the state over \$100 million between FY 2024 and FY 2027. Under Medicaid, lawmakers effectively wiped out cost-sharing for all Medicaid enrollees, including for high-income parents with disabled children who

enroll in Medicaid under the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act (TEFRA) option. This essentially puts taxpayers on the hook for the entire cost of Medicaid, which is expected to rise from \$11 billion in the 2022-23 biennium to \$17 billion in the 2026-27 biennium. Sure, some of the changes that legislators passed this session under the program are intended to bring Minnesota into conformity with federal changes. However, in true Minnesota fashion, lawmakers infused these new federal laws with a heavy dose of generosity, adding millions, if not hundreds of millions, in additional costs.

For example, when Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act in December 2022, it mandated that beginning January 1, 2024, all states should provide continuous 12-month coverage to children under age 19 who qualify for Medicaid coverage, irrespective of whether they become ineligible for the program during those 12 months. The law passed to adhere



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to this requirement further extended coverage to young adults up to 21 years old. Lawmakers passed another law requiring that children who qualify for Medicaid while they are under six years old *must* remain on the program until they reach six years of age, regardless of whether they remain qualified to receive taxpayer-funded medical coverage.

Under cash assistance programs like General Assistance (GA), MFIP, and Minnesota Supplemental Aid (MSA), certain types of income would be excluded from the applicants' countable income when determining eligibility for cash as well as childcare benefits. These include Retirement, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (RSDI) benefits and tribal per capita payments. Currently, hard-to-employ MFIP beneficiaries who have exhausted their 60-month lifetime limit must comply with MFIP requirements in their 60th month on the program, as well as “develop and comply with either an employment plan or a family stabilization services plan” to qualify for a hardship extension. However, beginning May 2026, only the latter condition will apply. Furthermore, penalties that are applied to recipients when they do not comply with work and training requirements in the MFIP program have also been significantly reduced, effective May 2026.

You should be concerned

Minnesota is not unique as a state with citizens, who, as Pres. Ronald Reagan described, “through no fault of their own must depend on the rest of us.” These include the disabled, the elderly, as well as working families who occasionally fall on hard times and need help getting back on their feet. But while our social safety net enables us to take care of these vulnerable individuals, the colossal expansion of the welfare system that lawmakers undertook in the last session will likely cause problems.

First, it is important to keep in mind that Minnesota's government embodies numerous roles, and each state program competes for limited resources. With a larger portion of the budget going to the welfare system, little remains for other services fundamental to the health and well-being of our entire state, such as roads and public safety.

But even by itself, this new, bigger welfare system is already proving to be unsustainable. In the budget forecast released in early December 2023, for example, MMB estimated that tax rev-



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enues collected in 2026 and 2027 won't be enough to cover the state's bigger and growing budget. Ergo, there is a budget hole of over \$2 billion. This is all thanks to our massive welfare system, which as of the beginning of the 2024 fiscal year, is the state's fastest-growing spending category in the budget.

Taxes were already raised in the 2023 legislative session just to fund the state's growing government — including its welfare system. But if the newly released budget forecast is anything to go by, taxes might have to be raised again if this new spending is going to be maintained into the future. The

problem, however, is that even without accounting for the most recent tax hikes, Minnesotans were already paying some of the highest taxes in the country. That fact alone has been largely to blame for our economy's mediocre performance in recent years. How these recently enacted tax hikes — and any other potential tax hikes in the future — will affect the economy is not hard to envision.

What's possibly more grievous than the monumental fiscal burden that lawmakers have bestowed on taxpayers is the stark reality that the new system they have created does little, if anything, to give those on welfare “the opportunity to succeed at home and at work.” Instead of creating a system that fosters independence and success, lawmakers have been patting themselves on the back for transforming the state's social safety net into one that turns an increasing number of Minnesotans into wardens of the state, irrespective of their actual need for assistance. And for those who are truly needy, legislators have settled for a less ambitious goal: making poverty more tolerable.

The vision of an end to welfare that Clinton touted remains an unrealized dream. Despite the watershed welfare reform bill of 1996, welfare spending has ballooned as money is funneled into other programs, such as Medicaid. More than the actual reform that it ushered in, the 1996 welfare bill presented an opportunity — a chance to reframe the nation's welfare ethos away from entitlement towards a cherished American ideal: the conviction that meaningful employment is the most effective weapon against poverty. In many ways, Minnesota's approach to welfare has diverged from this principle more than most states, and the recent 2023 legislative session has propelled us even further from this ideal. Minnesota has come around to a system the state attempted to discard nearly 30 years ago, one that exerts a heavy price on taxpayers without significantly assisting the poor to escape poverty and become self-sufficient. That is perhaps the greatest misfortune to come out of the 2023 session, one the effects of which will be felt for years to come, not only by taxpayers and welfare recipients, but the entire state economy. ★

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

Who says conservatives can't win?



John Hinderaker

We have a proven track record of mobilizing a base of supporters — average Minnesotans, not big-money out-of-state donors.

It's no secret that at the moment, Minnesota's political climate is not conducive to good public policy. But here is the good news: despite that political landscape, American Experiment has scored a series of big wins not only in Minnesota, but on the national level and in other states.

For example, our modeling showing the exorbitant cost of the Clean Electricity Performance Program played a key role in defeating Pres. Joe Biden's original, \$4 trillion Build Back Better bill in the U.S. Senate. North Dakota has twice retained our energy team, Isaac Orr and Mitch Rolling, to file public comments on the grid reliability impact of power plant regulations proposed by the Biden administration's EPA. These analyses will play a key role in litigation over the implementation of the regulations. Notable energy reports and cost and reliability modeling in North Carolina, Michigan, North Dakota, and Colorado brought about major policy wins to combat the green energy coalition that threatens reliable and affordable energy.

American Experiment's Peter Nelson provided the U.S. House of Representatives detailed advice in drafting health care price transparency legislation that has now passed the House and is likely to pass the Senate.

These are examples of the work American Experiment policy fellows do to enact real change at the state and national level. But it's not the only thing we do. We have a proven track record of mobilizing a base of supporters — average Minnesotans, not big-money out-of-state donors — to action that capture the attention of legislators and politicians. Led by policy fellow David Zimmer, we motivated our activist base of more than 122,000 Minnesotans to drive public comments successfully opposing a proposal in

the Sentencing Guidelines Commission that would have made criminal sentences *lighter* for thousands of offenders.

Our opposition to the so-called energy Blackout Bill drove 38,000 emails to legislators opposing it. Our campaign stripped away all Republican support and laid the foundation for accountability as electricity prices continue to rise and the grid becomes less reliable.

On the education front, we are winning our battle against Education Minnesota, the number one obstacle to improving education in the state — at one time an almost insurmountable challenge. Due to our efforts, the union's teacher membership declined by 3.1 percent in a single year. Additionally, we have waged a three-year battle against proposed changes to Minnesota's K-12 social studies standards, which are full of Critical Race Theory indoctrination and rampant anti-Americanism. Our campaign has resulted in more than 34,000 public comments being submitted in opposition to the standards, implementation of which was delayed by the legislature. In addition, education policy fellow Catrin Wigfall advocated for the school choice bill that passed North Dakota's legislature.

On the ever-important economic front, American Experiment economists John Phelan and Martha Njolomole successfully opposed proposed legislation that would have increased Minnesota's personal income tax rates and added a new capital gains tax. Had it passed, that measure would have made Minnesota the highest-tax state in the U.S.

No one would say that 2023 was a great year for conservatives. But more than any other organization, American Experiment delivered concrete, tangible policy wins. When the political landscape shifts, as it always does, the sky will be the limit. ★

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