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## Some Things I Would Have Liked To Have Known Sooner

*This document contains a collection of items published by Ronald H. Muhlenkamp, including:*

- “Reading List For Life And Investment Fundamentals 101”
- “Basic Financial Maxims I Want My Kids to Know”
- “Muhlenkamp’s Musings on Economics”
- “Employment Costs”
- “U.S. Personal Consumption Expenditures”
- “Reflecting over 40 Years—Lessons Learned and Changes Observed”

# ReadingList

## Reading List For Life And Investment Fundamentals 101

A reading list compiled by Ron Muhlenkamp. Originally published in January 1998 and expanded since.  
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### To Understand

The way things work

Why you'll never understand the other sex

Values

The evolution of moral standards

Why global warming is unlikely

The difference between modern liberals and conservatives

How the best and the brightest can be totally wrong

How to succeed

Economics

Economics - short course

Why socialism can't work

Politics

The fundamentals of fundamental security analysis

The fundamentals of understanding securities markets

How to pick stocks

Investing

The character of debts

Foreign Investing

Why the consumer is king

How it all fits together

### Read

*The Way Things Work*, by David McCauley  
*The Way the World Works*, by Jude Wanniski

*You Just Don't Understand*, by Deborah Tannen

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig

*Lila*, by Robert Pirsig

*Climate and the Affairs of Man*, by Neis Winkless  
and Iben Browning

*A Conflict of Visions*, by Thomas Sowell

*The Best & the Brightest*, by David Halberstam  
*Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand

*How to Fail at Nearly Everything*, by Scott Adams

*Human Action*, by Ludwig von Mises

*Economics in One Lesson*, by Henry Hazlitt

*Socialism*, by Ludwig von Mises

*Writings of Will Rogers*

*Security Analysis*, by Benjamin Graham, David Dodd  
and Sydney Cottle

*The Battle for Investment Survival*, by Gerald M. Loeb

*One Up on Wall Street*, by Peter Lynch  
*Common Stocks & Uncommon Profits*, by Philip Fisher

*The Intelligent Investor*, by Ben Graham  
*Berkshire Hathaway, Inc., Letter to Shareholders 1977-1999*,  
by Warren Buffett\*

*Stabilizing an Unstable Economy*, by Hyman Minsky

*Investment Biker*, by Jim Rogers

*Made in America*, by Sam Walton

*Ron's Road to Wealth*, by Ron Muhlenkamp

\* Don't confuse the writings about Mr. Buffett with the writings of Mr. Buffett.



**Muhlenkamp & Company, Inc.**  
Intelligent Investment Management

# MuhlenkampMethods

For the Intelligent Investor

Answers to questions you may not even know you have.

## Basic Financial Maxims I Want My Kids to Know

*This essay was originally published in Muhlenkamp Memorandum Issue 19, July 1991. Although addressed to Ron's children, the maxims in this essay are useful no matter who you are. As Ron says, "I often see people in their sixties and seventies making basic financial mistakes, even though they may know better. We all need to be reminded of the basics, even if we already know them." And yes, Ron reviews them periodically himself.*

"There is No Free Lunch."—Milton Friedman

There's no free income either.

The essentials of life are cheap. Only the luxuries are expensive.

A bad product is always a bad deal. Don't buy a car or appliance with a poor service record. Don't buy a house with a cracked foundation.

A good product can be a bad deal if the price is wrong. How do you know a good price? Shop around and be willing to walk away from any "deal."

The purpose of insurance is to protect against financial disaster. Any loss that is nonfinancial cannot be remedied by insurance.

Any loss that is not a disaster does not require insurance.

Financial products are simply agreements written on paper. Although written in English, they are written by lawyers and designed so you won't read them. Read them anyway, and read them again, and again, until you understand them.



The price of borrowing money is interest—and worry. Keep all borrowing below the worry point and don't borrow to buy things that depreciate; you will lose on both ends.

Don't rely on appreciation of the asset. If the price is too high, wait. It's too high for everyone else as well, and they will realize it in due time. The public tends to extrapolate trends long after the financial justification is gone. Read our essay, "Wake Up, America—Houses Don't Make You Money!"

Any agreement has two parties; the other person will be working for himself. Figure out whether he is working for or against you. Always check one level deeper, and follow up.

The assumptions that you make consciously won't hurt you. The assumptions you take for granted (what "everybody knows") will kill you. Always check the assumption behind the assumption you make.

If it's complicated, it is probably a bad deal.

If you don't understand it, it is a bad deal. Don't buy any product or service from someone who can't or won't explain it to you in terms you understand.

Don't confuse income and wealth. Income can end with a dismissal notice or a change in interest rates.

Don't confuse wealth with the current price of an asset. People get carried away with prices—up and down.

Don't count on Social Security. The benefits you receive will be a small fraction of what your grandparents now receive.

People think of inflation as prices going up. It's not. It's the value of money going down.

There are no guarantees, there are only guarantors. The phrase "It's guaranteed" requires the response: "By whom?"



Only the Ten Commandments were written in stone. All other laws are at the whim of politicians who will change them in response to current pressures.

When you change the rules a little, you change the game a lot.

Convenience is usually expensive. Ignorance is deadly.

“Collectibles” are faddish. They come and go. When everyone knows it’s a “collectible” the game is over.

You can’t spend yourself rich. You’ve spent a lot of time and effort to make a buck pretax. The money you don’t spend is worth more than the money you earn—it’s after-tax.

Fund your IRA every year—early if possible. Invest in an equity or total-return mutual fund. Equity returns compounded over long periods can be truly amazing.



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## Muhlenkamp's Musings on Economics

*This essay was originally published in Muhlenkamp Memorandum Issue 3, January 1988. More observations were added in October 1996. Themes include free will and the government, the effects of inflation and recession on spending patterns, the effects of investment on the economy, and the effect of income taxes on work incentive.*

### Economic Maxims

*"There is No Free Lunch."—Milton Friedman*

Therefore, everything consumed must be produced. Every dollar spent must be earned.

*Prices are set by the (potential) buyers.*

No person or company can make you buy their product (only government can do that). Unless the product and price attract a buyer, there will be no purchase.

*Organizations don't exist; only people exist.*

An organization is just a number of individuals who have some common interest(s).

*We are all volunteers.*

We cannot be effectively coerced into doing what we don't want to do. We can be prevented from doing what we want to do.

### Observations

1. People are diverse in talent, skills, desires, and interests. No matter how you write the rules, 10% of the people will fail. But the rules must be written for the 90%. The 10% can be treated as exceptions.

2. We cannot spend ourselves rich. We can only earn and invest to become rich.

3. People have three working speeds:

- They work for someone who can't/won't fire them, typically government.
- They work for someone who can fire them, typically a business.
- They work for themselves.



4. People have four spending modes:

- Spend their own money (money they've earned) on themselves (private economy).
- Spend money they've earned on someone else (private charity).
- Spend someone else's money on themselves (see the Senate office building).
- Spend someone else's money on someone else (government programs).

5. Inflation is much more detrimental to the long-term prosperity of people than is recession.

When in a recession, people work harder, spend less, and are more careful about the expenditures they do make. This is a self-correcting mechanism. In inflation, the incentive of people is not to work harder, but to speculate; not to borrow less, but to borrow more; not to spend less, but to spend more.

Farmers in the 1970s perceived it in their best interest not to plant corn but to borrow more money to buy more farmland. People working a 40-hour job found it in their best interest to borrow more money and buy a bigger house. We engendered a belief that you can spend yourself rich and, as long as interest rates were well below inflation, it worked.

This was done at the expense of the savers of the world. As long as people were willing to take 5¼% interest on their savings, others were able to borrow at 7½% (pretax) and buy houses that appreciated by 10%. This worked fine for borrowers, but it didn't do much for savers.

Then savers got smart and raised interest rates. The tables turned, and they remain turned today. Savers can now earn enough on their savings to offset inflation, pay the taxes, and have a penny or two left over. Today, borrowing a lot of money to buy a big house is a losing proposition. From 1965 to 1980 it was a winning proposition. Yet, that fact educated a whole generation in the belief that they could spend themselves rich. You cannot spend yourself rich, individually or nationally.

6. The economy is not strengthened by spending; it is strengthened by investment. My grandfather farmed with horses. One hundred years ago, two-thirds of the American public were farmers, and they farmed with horses. We live much better than they did with a lot less effort, not because they spent a lot, or because we spend a lot, but because people invested time and effort (or in lieu of that, they invested savings) in ideas ranging from Ford's car and tractor to McCormick's reaper and Edison's electric power. Today we benefit from these investments. If those people had spent their money (after all, wine, women, and song have always been available), we would not have these items today.



Mr. Singer, who invented the sewing machine, when asked why, said, "For the money." We are taught today that greed is a negative emotion. In some ways, greed is great. It makes a person very easy to motivate. I am grateful that Mr. Singer was greedy. It allows me to wear much better and cheaper clothing than my great grandfather did, because he was reliant on my great grandmother and her fingers and needle and thread for everything he wore.

## Further Observation

You can force people to put in their time, but you can't force them to do anything useful. Any nonmarket economy is evidence of this. If you want the ultimate description of how much time can be spent doing little useful work, read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

I have an uncle who is a farmer. A few years ago he toured Russia. When he returned, he told me it was no surprise to him that Russia had economic difficulties. He observed 11 people baling hay and, in his words, "doing the work I do with two." I commented that he thought of them as farmers. He said, "Yes, of course." I noted they were working not for themselves, but for the government.

## Another Observation

The following is an excerpt taken from an article entitled "When Economics Rises above Politics," by David R. Henderson, in *The Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1996.

*The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded the Nobel Prize in economics to . . . William S. Vickrey . . . and James Mirrlees.*

*Mr. Mirrlees . . . was an adviser to the British Labor Party. In 1971 he published an article in which he took as a given that the government should redistribute income from rich to poor. Making reasonable assumptions about people's skills and earning power, and taking account of tax rates' effect on the incentive to earn, Mr. Mirrlees used some heavy mathematics to calculate the top marginal tax rate the government should impose on high-income people. Any guesses about what he found? Was it 83%, the top rate in Britain at the time? Perhaps 70%, then the top U.S. rate? Not quite. The top marginal tax rate, concluded Mr. Mirrlees, should be no more than about 20%. Moreover, he found that the marginal tax rate should be that same 20% for everyone. In short, the optimal tax structure, said this left-wing economist, is what we now call a flat tax.*



*Mr. Mirrlees was stunned by his own result. "I must confess," he wrote, "that I had expected the rigorous analysis of income taxation in the utilitarian manner to provide arguments for high tax rates. It has not done so."*

*Mr. Vickrey, in an article in the Palgrave Dictionary of Economics, wrote that the marginal tax rate on the highest-skilled person in society should be zero. . . "There is no point to deterring him from earning the last dollar of income, since if he does not earn it there will be no revenue from it." Arthur Laffer couldn't have said it better. . . Mr. Vickrey wrote [in 1964]: "There still remains the fact that money income from gainful work is subject to an income tax while imputed income from leisure is not taxed. . . . Accordingly, an income tax tends to make individuals choose leisure in preference to gainful work to an uneconomical extent."*

Folks, my conclusions aren't novel or new, but they require politicians to relinquish some of our tax money and therefore some of their power. And politics is all about power.





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## Employment Costs (W-2: Married Filing Jointly; No Dependents)

<b>Employee's Deduction</b>	<b>January 1996</b>	<b>January 2006</b>	<b>January 2014</b>
Gross Wage <sup>1</sup>	\$36,000.00	\$40,000.00	\$45,000.00
FICA	2,754.00	3,060.00	3,442.50
• Social Security (6.2%)			
• Medicare (1.45%)			
Federal Withholding	3,626.00	2,714.00	2861.00
PA State Withholding	1,008.00	1,228.00	1,400.00
PA State Unemployment	10.80	36.00	31.50
Occupational Tax	10.00	10.00	N/A
Local Services Tax	N/A	N/A	52.00
Local Earned Income Tax	360.00	400.00	450.00
<b>Employee's Take-Home Pay</b>	<b>\$28,231.20</b>	<b>\$32,552.00</b>	<b>\$36,763.00</b>

### Employer's Costs

Gross Wage	\$36,000.00	\$40,000.00	\$45,000.00
FICA	2,754.00	3,060.00	3,442.50
• Social Security			
• Medicare			
Health Insurance	4,207.32	13,765.20	22,264.00
PA State Unemployment	167.52	266.94	557.76
Federal Unemployment			43.00
<b>Employee's Cost to Company</b>	<b>\$43,128.84</b>	<b>\$57,092.14</b>	<b>\$71,307.26</b>
Pension/Profit Sharing Contribution <sup>2</sup>	9,000.00	10,000.00	11,250.00
<b>Employee's Cost to Company</b>	<b>\$52,128.84</b>	<b>\$67,092.14</b>	<b>\$82,557.26</b>
Employee Cost: Employee Take-Home Pay (Pre-Profit Sharing)	1.53	1.75	1.94
Employee Cost: Employee Take-Home Pay (Post-Profit Sharing)	1.85	2.06	2.25

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the U.S. median income.

<sup>2</sup> Based on maximum allowable by law: 25% of gross wages.

# U.S. Personal Consumption Expenditures Per Capita 1950, 1980, and 2010

(Real 2010 dollars)

## 1950

Population: 151MM

**Total: \$11,313**

## 1980

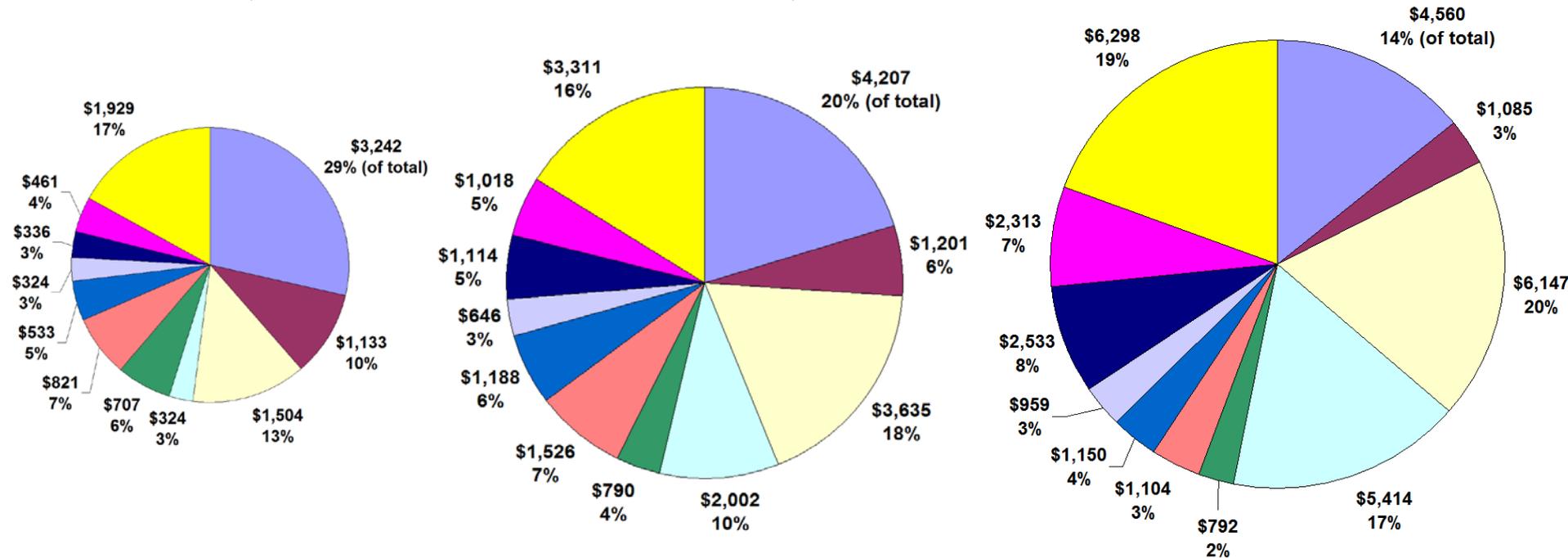
Population: 227MM

**Total: \$20,638**

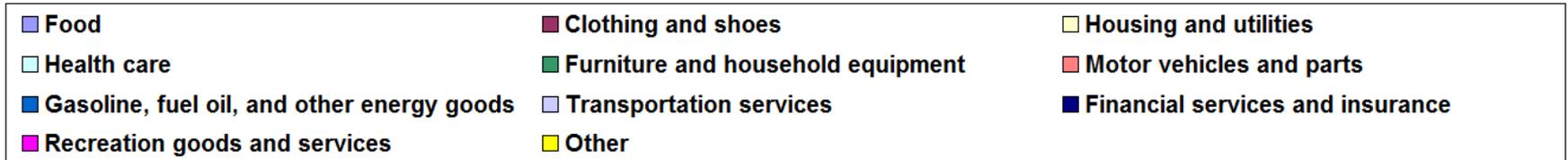
## 2010

Population: 308MM

**Total: \$32,354**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis



# MuhlenkampMethods

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## Reflecting over 40 Years—Lessons Learned and Changes Observed

By Ron Muhlenkamp

To celebrate the anniversary of Muhlenkamp & Company, I was asked to put on paper what I have learned over the last 40+ years in the industry and comment on any changes I've seen over that period. This essay is my attempt at meeting this request. About ten years ago we wrote a book, *Ron's Road to Wealth—Insights for the Curious Investor*, in which we did a similar thing, though in more detail than what we have here.

### Lessons I've Learned

*Free economies work; managed economies don't.* Let's look at real instances: The obvious examples are to compare East Germany to West Germany during the time before their reunification in 1990. Look at North Korea versus South Korea, both were in shambles in 1950, but South Korea is a thriving economy today. Also, look at Cuba which is stuck in the 1950s. Venezuela has gone from prosperous to destitute in a decade. My observation is that if people are lacking food, clothing, and shelter, they will do almost anything to acquire these basic needs. Once these needs are covered, economics is all about incentives. So the question becomes, how do you get people to produce more? And the answer has been proven time and time again: you allow them to benefit from their own efforts; in other words, you pay them. The beauty of a free market is the incentives are built in. In a free market, you only get paid if you serve your fellow man in a way that he's willing to pay you since you can't force anyone to buy your product. It doesn't matter what I think my services are worth, it only matters what my services or product are worth to someone else.

*In a free economy, the consumer is king.* In a free economy we, the consumer, can influence price, production, and distribution by exercising our free will (spending our dollars). Sellers have incentive to improve their product or service to meet the needs and requests of the consumers (the "kings").



These continuous improvements to product and services are one reason why free economies thrive relative to managed economies

*Prosperity must be produced before it is consumed.* You can't spend your way to prosperity, you can only produce your way to prosperity. Folks, that's true on a personal level, that's true on the local level, and that's true on a national level. Nevertheless, we have economists who encourage us to spend money (many times money we don't have). Debt can kill prosperity. So for an economy to thrive in the long term, it must be productive and live within its means (same goes for personal finances). As we discussed earlier, allowing the worker to benefit from their own effort creates the incentive to produce.

*People have three working speeds.* Low speed is when you can't be fired and can't earn a bonus—typically, that's working for government. They can't fire you, but you can't earn a bonus either. Medium speed is when you can be fired, but you can also earn a bonus or a premium—typically, that's working for private enterprise. High speed is when people work for themselves—that's when they pull out all the stops (and likely when they experience the most satisfaction in their work). I'm not the only one to notice this: the best-run private companies are those who find a way of compensating their employees in ways that encourage the employee to act as if she's working for herself. The best work comes from people who are working for themselves and can keep the fruits of their labor.

*People have four spending modes.* One mode is when people spend their own money on themselves. The second mode is when they spend their own money (money they've earned) on someone else—which is typically gifts or charity. Most of us will spend more money on a gift for our friend than we'd spend on ourselves, which I think is kind of fascinating. A third mode is when we spend other people's money on ourselves, and I would encourage you to check the Senate office buildings to see what happens in that regard. And then, the fourth mode is when we spend other people's money on other people—which is what politics is all about. Frankly, I think the major problem with politicians is they're all on O-P-M (they are dealing with Other People's Money). I've found that the best decisions are made when spending your own money on yourself or others.

Notice that these five lessons tie together: free market economies perform better than managed economies because more people are working for themselves than for government and more people are



spending their money, not other people's money. It's all about incentives, and the incentives in a market economy create much better decisions than in a managed or planned economy.

*Ownership equals responsibility.* I've learned that people take better care of property they own than property they rent. And they take better care of property they rent than property held in common (see the former Soviet Union). People take better care of their pets than strays. You can debate the morality of ownership of animals or land all you like, but the practical effect is that establishing ownership generally results in people working harder to care for that which they have acquired the title to, and that's a good (productive) thing.

*You must live by Mother Nature's rules.* Ignoring reality usually turns out badly. I grew up as a farm kid, you either lived by Mother Nature's rules or you don't prosper as a farmer. When I got into engineering, I found out that you either live by Mother Nature's rules or your engineering doesn't work. The feedback is generally rapid and hard to ignore. There are some endeavors, however, where you can ignore the difference between what actually works and what doesn't for a *long* time. When I got to business school, we were taught that if you can convince the hundred people in the room of something, they can make it happen. That might work (for a while) in marketing, in politics, and in economics, however it does not work in production, in farming, nor in engineering. Mother Nature's rules will overwhelm whatever good logic you think you brought to the game.

*People have a nearly unlimited capacity to believe what they want to believe.* I've known folks who have been wrong for 40 years, but they're still making a good living because our country is so prosperous and they are "protected" (to use a Peggy Noonan term). "Protected" means that if they are wrong, they don't starve, lose food, clothing, or shelter. They can be wrong for 40 years and still keep their job, particularly if they're an economist or a tenured professor. They could probably be wrong for 40 years as a weather person too. We all laugh at the weatherman, but their record is better than some economists.

*Just because everybody knows something doesn't make it true.* In fact, in investing, if everybody knows something, that alone makes it false, or at least an unprofitable investment. It is almost poetic—the public adopts a rule of thumb based on one time period and one set of circumstances, but it continues to use this rule of thumb after the circumstances have changed.



*How you deal with your mistakes matters.* When I watch some uneducated people make a mistake, they say, “Gee, I made a mistake.” They change what they do and they go on with life. When I see some educated people make a mistake (especially those “protected” folks), what I tend to hear is, “Well, I would’ve been right if only.” That’s how you get economists who are wrong for 40 years but never change their minds or their methods. That’s how you get politicians who spend more and more money on programs that have never produced the desired outcomes. They can’t admit they were wrong, and they are protected from the results of their failures, so they never have to.

*People assume that others act as they themselves do.* As a result, honest people have a hard time believing anyone would lie to them, actively deceive them, or misrepresent something to them. They assume everyone else is honest too. I had a client who was so honest that he couldn’t conceive of telling someone a lie. And his difficulty was, as a result, he couldn’t conceive of anyone telling him a lie. He got a sales pitch one day and asked, “Is that true?” and I said, “No, that’s a sales pitch...” and he said, “Oh, it didn’t quite make sense, but I didn’t think he would lie to me.”

*People have different approaches to issues.* I’ve observed a difference in what I call the “rural mentality” versus the “urban mentality” and I think this major difference is reflected in our politics. The rural mentality is if you have a problem, you fix it. The urban mentality is if you have a problem, you call somebody else to fix it. Since politicians are quick to promise to solve your problems if you vote for them (and pay their taxes), an urban mentality lends itself to bigger government responsible for more things in our society, whereas a rural mentality does not.

To my mind, Houston’s response to Hurricane Harvey reflected the “rural mentality.” The media’s astonishment at the volunteers reflected an urban mentality (though I witnessed a similar response in New York City on 9/11). I would encourage you to think about your local fire company. If it’s a volunteer company, it’s reflecting what I call the rural mentality. If it’s a paid company, it’s reflecting what I would call the urban mentality.

And yes, before you jump all over me, these lessons are not hard and fast, but I find them useful ways of thinking about things. If you don’t find them useful, discard them. If you do find them useful, then I’ve done you some good. Life is not a dress rehearsal, you only get one shot at it. I hope my lessons will help you out or, at least, spur some good conversations.



### Changes over the Years

The biggest change that I've seen in the last 40 years is that communication has gotten faster. As a result, we have more short-term cycles within the same long-term cycles. And that the long-term business cycle used to be four to five years, but we've had three experiences in my lifetime: in the '60s and the '80s and the last 10 years when the business cycle got extended. But we continue to get more and more short-term cycles.

The trouble with instant communication is there are no longer any filters. You and I and anyone else can put an opinion out there, frankly, with no consequences. It used to be that a reporter or editor would do some checking of their work, but the incentive now is to be fast, not accurate or balanced. I'm finding I have to wait two or three days to get the story from both sides of an argument and I have to do more of that work myself. So, I say, "Who makes sense and who doesn't?" I've also found that more bias has crept in, and I have to do more work to ferret out the bias in almost all the information I receive.

In order to determine if an article or statement is truly neutral, I change the nouns (or pronouns). For example, every place that says "he," I write "she," and every place that says "she," I write "he." And then I read it again to see if it sounds sexist from either reading. If it's truly neutral, it will not. The fact that I have to do this indicates how rare it is for what is written to be factual and not editorial. Also, many words have become loaded terms (to some people they have much more or a different meaning than what is in the dictionary).

Another change I've noticed is our educated have become more arrogant. I always knew that Harvard was arrogant. MIT has gotten just as bad...a great disappointment to me. That's a bad thing, because arrogant people don't learn from their mistakes (see the discussion on that above).

### The things I've just talked about all tie together.

The end result is that even though we KNOW what works best economically we are pursuing the same old failed solutions touted by our academics and politicians only with increasing vigor. They won't change, and we haven't fired them (yet?). This is pretty frustrating for me to watch. We're doing our very best to strangle the golden goose that is the free market.



**A Final Thought**

My grandchildren are now ages 9 through 20. I've started asking them what money is for. They all think money is to buy things and I agree with that, up to a point. But once food, clothing, and shelter, and a few other things are covered, I believe that money is to build things—which looks a little bit different. I would encourage you to think about money and how much the purpose is to buy things. At what point does the purpose become to build things?

Thank you to our clients and friends for an interesting 40 years!

*The comments made in this commentary are opinions and are not intended to be investment advice or a forecast of future returns.*

