



Braver Angels
Civic Scholars Council
 Courageous Citizenship Papers

Toward a Transpartisan Politics of Limits And Beauty

By John de Graaf*

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

John de Graaf suggests that concern about the social and environmental effects of American consumerism concern both Left and Right in America, and that a common effort to challenge consumerism, particularly through public work on restoration of urban and natural habitats provides a common goal to bring us together.

This paper argues that consumerism poses a major threat to the American environment and to our social lives, health and communities. A Gemini AI analysis of the paper found many key points of red-blue agreement, and suggested that “by focusing on **limits** and **beauty**, we can step out of the partisan outrage cycle and work on tangible, local projects—from community gardens to neighborhood “open houses”—that improve our actual lives.”

Introduction

In October 2025, Utah’s Republican Governor Spencer Cox, who called for calm after the murder of Charlie Kirk, wrote a scathing [critique](#) of consumerism’s impact on our national values. Cox cited historian Christopher Lasch: “Advertising manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored.” “The online attention economy,” Cox added. “especially social media, has intensified the reality Lasch described.” Certainly, courageous citizenship includes a willingness to tackle the hard issues that have divided us, and consumerism may be among the most intractable. We bemoan the idea that this generation may not be as materially rich as its parents, but ignore the pressures on resources caused by the proliferation of material wealth, the crime fueled by our addictions, plastic and narcotic, and the need to live more sustainably for the sake of future generations and other species.

In 1997, I directed a [film](#) for PBS called AFFLUENZA, exploring the consequences of our love affair with materialism, and wrote a 2001 [book](#) by the same name. Between that book and Cox’s article, the domination of American life by consumerism increased dramatically. We now swim in a sea of marketing messages from multiple media, a constant echo chamber of temptations to our wallets. As Cox, David Brooks and others, including [David French](#), have pointed out, this ad-driven materialism has weakened our social bonds, fueled our greed, divided our communities, created an epidemic of loneliness and cheapened our values.

Based on my research for AFFLUENZA and more recent articles, written for the center-right publication, *Front Porch Republic*, I contend that consumerism exacerbates our current polarization and undermines our society. I also believe that concern for the deleterious impact of consumerism on our children, families, communities, environment and political fragmentation, may provide common ground for bringing Americans together toward new purpose and unity.

Shopping till we drop

Full disclosure: I lean to the “blue.” Yet AFFLUENZA, the film, was more popular at BYU and Kentucky than at Berkeley or Harvard. Conservatives and liberals alike told me that it helped them tame the urge to spend. Today, despite generally higher incomes, Senator Bernie Sanders points out that “60 percent of our citizens are living paycheck to paycheck.” [Data confirms this](#);

few could survive more than six weeks on current savings. Certainly, much of this can be attributed, as Sanders suggests, to inequality, a gap that has become a canyon in the past 25 years.

But it is also true that many Americans, influenced by marketing, consistently spend beyond their means. Private and public debt expand apace with expectations. House sizes have [tripled](#) since World War II, while families shrunk. Expensive electronics, almost unknown in the 1990s, have become necessities, replaced every couple of years. The average American flies much more, and farther. The best-selling cars are expensive, gas-guzzling SUVs and trucks. In the 1950s, we worried about “Keeping up with the Joneses,” who tended to live in similar houses and drove Chevrolets. Today, our role models are the affluent who fill our viewing fare. At the very least, we feel constant pressure to buy. When I wrote *Affluenza*, the online economy was in its infancy. Now it is ubiquitous. Marketers probe our purchases and preferences and target messages directly to our weaknesses. Our email boxes fill with spam and fraud; social media blossoms with come-ons; our phones ring unceasingly as robots or real people tempt us with more things to purchase. Every inch of public space appears plastered with commercial appeals. Governments consider us customers rather than citizens as the language of the market invades our politics.

Today’s “engineers” manipulate minds and algorithms instead of structures. Consider the vast salaries paid to computer wizards whose *calling* is to persuade us to “need” things we haven’t even thought of. What Paul Roberts, in [The Impulse Society](#), terms “the treadmill of ever-faster gratification,” as pioneered by Amazon, leaves us impatient for immediate results, “a frustration not unrelated to the strains of angry populism now paralyzing our politics.” Constantly expectant and quickly bored, we accept this addicted life as the new normal. We suffer as in London under the Blitz, bombarded by commerce.

When we ask, as seems obligatory each Presidential election, if voters are “better off” than four years ago, it always means the amount of money in our wallets rather than the joy in our lives. Candidates and pollsters aren’t interested in whether voters have happier families, stronger social bonds, purposeful work, better health or greater access to the beauties of Nature. It’s all about the money.

Anyone concerned about family life should worry especially about the attitude marketers take to “consumers-in-training,” as they seek to keep our children [pestering](#) their parents to purchase. It’s a form of corporate child abuse. Is it any wonder that teenagers enter college not to learn skills of service and make a difference, but to prepare for making a killing? As Cox points out, our universities must now pander to such demands, continually substituting business training for humanities and the classics, as if the question, “How then shall we live?” was no longer important.

Not only does economic life in what I call the Age of Affluenza stimulate constant cravings and multiple addictions. It makes all things disposable, even people. Friendships become transactional—what can he do for me? We are evermore caught in what William Wordsworth called “the perpetual whirl of trivial objects.”

Traditional conservatives such as German economist [Wilhelm Ropke](#), author of *A HUMANE ECONOMY*, defended the free market against advocates of socialism, but understood that the market should be kept in its place lest it destroy the moral bonds that hold communities

together. “The curse of commercialization is that it results in the standards of the market spreading into regions which should remain beyond supply and demand,” Ropke wrote. “This vitiates the true purposes, dignity and savor of life and thereby makes it unbearably ugly, undignified and dull. Every gesture of courtesy, kindness and neighborliness is degraded into a move behind which we suspect ulterior motives.” A culture of mutual distrust arises.

In thrall to the GDP

To make sure all this marketing is working, our government measures “consumer confidence.” Will Americans strangle each other for a place at the head of the line on Black Friday? Will they buy “big ticket” items for Christmas, showering luxury cars on most-favored partners as evidence of affection? If they do, then a growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the *monetary* value of the goods and services we produce, will be evidence of our economic success. The bigger it gets, the better our economy is seen to be.

Both of America’s major political parties worship at the altar of GDP, each pledging to “grow the economy” faster than their rivals. But GDP is a hollow Golden Calf. It counts as positive anything with a price regardless of its impact on our wellbeing. Drug and alcohol sales add to it, and so does the price of repairing the damage they cause. Heart attacks are a plus because it’s expensive to treat them. Divorces mean extra homes, more furniture, and lavish legal bills. Ka-ching! On the other hand, GDP *does not* measure many useful “goods”—the value of unpaid housework, for example, or of exercise not purchased in a gym, of walks in the woods or the kindness of strangers.

Economist Simon Kuznets, who developed the [GDP](#) (then called the Gross National Product) in 1934, stated forcefully that such a measurement was no indicator of national wellbeing. In the 1960s, both [President Johnson](#) and Senator [Robert Kennedy](#) criticized our focus on economic growth. Indeed, much of what currently boosts GDP includes defensive expenditures to patch up “negative externalities,” as economists term the deleterious impacts of *previous* growth. While economic growth is still vital in poor nations and clearly improves welfare there, the late economist [Herman Daly](#) pointed out that in the United States it has become *uneconomic*—its costs now exceed benefits. Challenging uneconomic growth offers a possible project to unite reds and blues.

The consequences of our growth obsession

The negative externalities of GDP growth are now too obvious to ignore. “Global warming, the most serious crisis overtaking mankind,” warned conservative Rod Dreher in his 2006 book, [Crunchy Cons](#), “is the result of our refusal to live within our means.” Alarmingly destructive, it triggers fires and floods that overwhelm governments and insurance companies alike. Despite alternative energy sources, [fossil fuel consumption](#) and output of planet-warming gases continues to rise. [Entire species](#) are threatened; America’s birds (and the insects they feed on) have seen catastrophic declines. The sheer [weight](#) of humans and our domestic animals now exceeds all wild vertebrates by 25-1, pushing them toward extinction at astonishing rates. Pollutants from agriculture and industry create “dead zones” in the oceans; plastics collect in immense marine garbage patches; microplastics fill our bodies.

Since World War II, we have used up vastly more [resources](#) than did everyone else in all previous history. Some economists believe alternative energy sources will allow infinite growth to continue, but they too generate huge costs in destructive mining and transport. The [Global](#)

[Footprint Network](#) estimates that by July of each year, humans use more non-renewable resources and discard more waste than is sustainable. If the whole world were to consume at American levels, we would need [five Earths](#). We can't grow on like this.

In 1972, a best-selling book, [The Limits to Growth](#), by a team of MIT computer scientists, estimated that if present trends continued, Earth's life supports would collapse within a century. New research confirms that their estimates were on target. Dutch econometrician [Gaya Herrington](#), commissioned by a bank to study the issue, told me (in a 2025 interview) she has never seen a projection so closely matched by empirical data. Yet we continue to ignore its findings.

The need for limits

Limits and the American ethic were always uncomfortable bedfellows. De Tocqueville, two centuries ago, commented on the fierce productive energy of Americans. And why not? The frontier then seemed limitless. Land and resources were plentiful and population pressures small. Of course, the land wasn't empty. Native peoples were willing to share, but grew tired of greedy European settlers and their cavalier dishonoring of treaties. "Like a spring freshet that overflows its banks," Lakota chief [Tatanka Yotanka](#) (Sitting Bull) described the whites, adding that "the love of possessions is a disease with them."

In 1904, [Katharine Lee Bates](#), added a new verse to her anthem, AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL ("a prayer, not a boast"—singer Brandi Carlile). "America, America, God mend thine every flaw," Bates wrote. "Confirm thy soul in self-control..." She was responding to the Spanish American War, a conflict she viewed as imperialistic. But she had a double meaning. Bates mourned the materialism of the Gilded Age, when giant department stores took root and mail order catalogs like those of [Montgomery Ward](#), the Amazon of its day, found their way into American homes, a novelty as compelling then as online shopping is today.

Christopher Lasch, whose devotees span the political spectrum, made the need for limits the centerpiece of his 1991 magnum opus, [The True and Only Heaven](#). He warned that consumerism, propelled by advertising, was eviscerating families and communities and leading to addictions and a "culture of narcissism" that could only be reversed by an acceptance of limits on economic desire. Lasch shared conservative concerns about a pattern of permissiveness that weakened moral commitments, but attributed it to values promoted by television programming and advertising, not the free-love philosophies of the counterculture. His critique, and that of fellow iconoclast [Wendell Berry](#), may provide another focus for red-blue cooperation.

Yet, when it comes to limits, Lasch would have been dismayed by the contemporary shallowness of both red and blue. Democrats find Lasch's economic egalitarianism appealing, while Republicans respond to his fears over the decline of traditional morality. Neither would be comfortable with his fully integrated outlook. It is ironic that [Lasch](#), a socialist, and later a civic populist influenced by the ideas of [Harry Boyte](#) and others, should now be more revered by the Right, from moderate conservatives such as David Brooks to MAGA leaders including J.D. Vance and Josh Hawley. There is little in contemporary politics that Lasch would have found more upsetting than the mindless chants of "Drill, Baby, Drill," that seem to burst spontaneously from GOP rallies, with the exception perhaps of the massive tax cuts for the wealthy enshrined in the Big Beautiful Bill. Of those, he would likely have admonished the Right using Jesus' [words](#): "You cannot serve both God and Money."

But Lasch would have cautioned the Left against its faith in professional expertise and rejection of tradition. He was convinced that two-parent families provide more of a [*Haven in a Heartless World*](#) than do single-parent alternatives, and out-of-wedlock births often end up hard on children. He also attributed these problems to our refusal to accept limits on our behavior, and neglect of service in our lives.

Extrinsic and intrinsic values

The debate over growth and its limits rests most firmly on the values that underlie different viewpoints. “Extrinsic” values focus on external aims, including fame (now redefined as celebrity), fortune, physical appearance, power, influence, and popularity. “Intrinsic” values come from internal motivations such as service, altruism, patience, forgiveness, honesty, courage, and love. [Studies](#) by psychologists Tim Kasser and Richard Ryan convincingly maintain that “intrinsic” values enhance our happiness, while similar studies suggest that extrinsic values are more likely to leave us perpetually dissatisfied. Extrinsic values are toxic for families; most divorces are precipitated at least in part by conflicts around money.

Yet extrinsic values often overwhelm intrinsic ones, as consumer culture teaches that the good life is the *goods* life—“he who dies with the most toys wins,” in the parlance of a 90s bumper sticker. [Studies](#) show that no matter how much income Americans make, most feel they would be satisfied if they just had more. They are likely to be disappointed. When extrinsic values prevail, there is never enough to satisfy. Of course, this is precisely the outcome marketers desire: keep shoppers dissatisfied so they always want and spend more.

Capitalism and moral restraint

The world’s great spiritual philosophers have always cautioned against greed. Buddha preached the reduction of desires, Christ, altruism. The pagans, too, had their admonitions—King Midas was a cautionary tale. It can be argued convincingly that America’s extrinsic values are deeply anti-Christian, indeed, inimical to all spiritual teachings.

Classical economists like Adam Smith emphasized that capitalist rapaciousness must be moderated by “[moral sentiments](#),” including frugality. John Stuart Mill suggested that although population and wealth *could* continue to grow, we should choose a “[stationary state](#)” long before our growth extirpated beauty from the world. It would not necessarily be a sacrifice. Abraham Maslow, in his [Hierarchy of Needs](#), held that beyond the basic requirements of food, shelter and safety, most of our needs were non-material, including belonging, esteem, self-actualization, knowledge, and beauty. Though we often choose to find love or esteem through expensive cars or clothing, we might better obtain them by being good and generous people.

Happiness research

Shortly after the economic crash of 2008, when it seemed that economic reform might really be possible, I became interested in the worldwide campaign for *happiness*, inspired by the tiny Asian nation of Bhutan, whose King famously proposed that “[Gross National Happiness](#) is more important than Gross National Product.” Bhutan developed a new [index](#) for measuring happiness (or wellbeing) based on insights from recent studies in psychology. With others, I began the [Happiness Alliance](#), an initiative for measuring wellbeing, in 2011, attended the

United Nations meeting which rolled out the first [World Happiness Report](#), and visited Bhutan as an “expert advisor” to its government in 2013.

Consistently, the nations of northern Europe, particularly the [Nordic](#) nations, have topped world rankings. Sadly, the United States had slipped from 11th to 24th in happiness surveys by [2025](#), perhaps driven by our emphasis on extrinsic values. Despite a tripling of our per capita economic output, [fewer](#) Americans now describe themselves as “very happy” than did so 50 years ago. Once modest material needs are met, other factors matter more—social connection, health,, education and “time balance,” among others.

Time versus money

One characteristic of the happier northern European nations is that they work less, and workers often choose to take productivity gains in time instead of cash. In 1994, I produced the PBS [documentary](#) *RUNNING OUT OF TIME*, exploring the strange anomaly that working hours in the United States had risen since 1970 despite increasing productivity. Consumer expectations led us to choose money over time as a reward for more productive work. The result was an epidemic of stress, [poor health](#) and [loneliness](#).

My work-life balance [expertise](#) and knowledge of international policies led to speaking invitations in many countries and throughout the United States. As a leading advocate for a political campaign called [Take Back Your Time](#), I was surprised to find equal enthusiasm from Right and Left for our efforts, though this did not ensure conservative political support for such proposals as paid family leave, sick leave and [vacations](#). When a [bill](#) for mandatory paid vacations that I helped draft reached Congressional committees in 2009, FOX News pilloried me for so outlandish an idea, despite the fact that almost every other nation has paid vacations by law. But to be fair, FOX was also the only network which even felt the issue newsworthy.

Nonetheless, I believe the effort to win more leisure time also offers potential to bridge some of our political divisions. Clearly, if we are to make a case for limits on consumer expectations, we must offer an alternative appealing enough to compensate for the perceived sacrifice that any reduction in buying power is likely to conjure. In place of stuff, we can offer better work-time balance, improved health, greater social connection, reduced stress, less dog-eat-dog competition; these goals are shared by Right and Left.

Toward a politics of beauty

But an equally fortuitous route to cooperation might come from a renewed attention to public work beautifying our communities and landscapes, and re-introducing nature into our lives. [Beauty](#), contrary to common thought, is not primarily “in the eye of the beholder,” but rather a near-universal human perception. Evolution honed our appreciation for life-enhancing landscapes, and a growing revulsion to ugliness as life-threatening. Studies in the UK and elsewhere confirm remarkable uniformity regarding which landscapes and architectural designs people find most beautiful (or ugly), and that living (or being) in aesthetically-pleasing communities or natural settings adds as much as 20 percent to individuals’ subjective judgments of their wellbeing.

Tourists from all cultures flock to our National Parks (“America’s best idea”—author Wallace Stegner), because they find them beautiful. The most popular bipartisan bill during Trump’s first term was the [Great American Outdoors Act](#), providing more support for parks. Parks also make us healthier: a movement of doctors called [ParkRx](#) actually prescribes time in nature as medicine for many maladies, especially for low-income children. In addition to parks, conservatives and liberals alike appreciate their gardens, beauty tended with care. Likewise, strolling in intimate, artful cities like Florence reduces cortisol and stress levels, while the monotonous steel skyscrapers of brutalist modernity increase [both](#).

According to Harvard philosopher [Elaine Scarry](#), beauty makes us more empathetic, altruistic and sociable. A public work [experiment](#) in Philadelphia to replace garbage-strewn vacant lots and graffiti-ridden abandoned homes with parks and gardens reduced violent crime and mental illness by 30 percent, encouraged trust among neighbors and returned some \$70 in reduced costs for every dollar spent. What’s not to like, no matter where you sit on the political fence?

The defense and creation of beauty have a long [history](#) in America, from Emerson to Muir, from the Hudson School to the Arts and Crafts Movement, from Central Park to the “City Beautiful” campaign of the early 1900s, from Liberty Hyde Bailey’s “Country Life” initiative to poet Vachel Lindsay’s 1912 walk from Springfield, Illinois to Santa Fe, the subject of his lovely lyrical missive “[Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty](#).”

New Deal public work brought Americans together as the [CCC](#) restored damaged landscapes to beauty and health, Federal Arts projects brightened public buildings, music and theater projects brought hope and joy to far-flung towns, and many new national parks were added to our legacy of protected beauty. The 1960s brought a new blossoming of beauty in America, with great bipartisan support. Lady Bird Johnson’s [Beautification](#) Campaign was the most popular initiative of her husband’s time in office, while Interior Secretary [Stewart Udall](#), drawn to [hozho](#)—the “Beauty Way” of the Navajo, introduced conservation measures then acclaimed by friends and foes alike. “An increasing Gross National Product has become the Holy Grail, and most of the economists who are its keepers have no concern for the economics of beauty,” Udall [mourned](#) in 1968.

A new beautification [campaign](#), aimed at restoring our abused environment, protecting the “natural capital” of our forests, lakes and streams, and adding natural luster to the grim cities where too many Americans live, offers the kind of public work and civic participation advocacy that might help smooth Braver Angels’ rocky path toward depolarization. There is room for the both the expert and the amateur in designing the more people-friendly, aesthetically-pleasing communities of our future. There is a sense of purpose in a beautification [program](#) that, instead of clinging to destructive coal mining, might hire unemployed miners to restore the severed mountain tops of Appalachia, replant them in diverse stands of carbon-capturing trees, and return its streams to sparkling purity.

Both democratic decision-making and public work will be found in encouraging urban beautification, including planting millions of flowering and shade trees. As in Philadelphia, dollars would be well-spent in supporting “Renaissance Zones” using grants and tax incentives for beauty-led civic renewal in poor communities. A rigorous bipartisan campaign to make

America beautiful again might offer us the vision of living in surroundings with novelty of design and access to nature, encouraging the awe and wonder inspired by God's good earth. And that might even provide enough joy and meaning to reduce our growing addiction to both things and drugs.

Conclusion: who will tell the people?

Yet, whatever pleasing alternative we might offer, the need to understand and accept limits cannot be ignored. In 1991, Christopher Lasch wrote that, "Neither [Left nor Right] addresses *the overriding issue of limits*." (my italics) "The fact remains" he added, that, "the earth's finite resources will not support an indefinite expansion of industrial civilization. The need for a more equitable distribution of wealth ought to be obvious, both on moral and economic grounds. What is not so obvious is that equality implies a more modest standard of living for all, not an extension of the lavish standards enjoyed by the favored classes in the industrial nations to the rest of the world." Lasch knew that such an extension is simply not sustainable.

It takes courageous citizens to encourage sacrifice for the sake our communities, our children and theirs. Our Founding Fathers pledged their fortunes as well as their lives and honor. Can we, honoring them 250 years later, pledge less? Yet, let us also remember that a [less consumptive life](#) will be more satisfying, offering us time to improve our health, spend with our families and friends, and savor the joys of nature and service to others.

* John de Graaf is a documentary filmmaker, author, public speaker and environmental activist. His two most recent films are From Sea To Shining Sea, the story behind the song "America the Beautiful" and Econoclast: Herman Daly And The Gospel Of Growth, about ecological economics. His 1997 film and 2001 book Affluenza were highly-acclaimed best-sellers.