





Somehow we allowed the United States to morph into a country that hollowed out its manufacturing base and sent the jobs overseas, that refused to maintain and rebuild its own infrastructure.

That would not establish a first-rate public school system for all of its children. That spent more money per capita than any other country on the planet for health care, but still could not cover some 50 million of its citizens.

It became a country that fought wars but had no idea how to win them or pay for them. A country that let a great city like New Orleans drown rather than protect it with an adequate system of levees.

It's a country in which a bridge on an interstate highway in Minneapolis collapsed at rush hour, hurling cars, vans and trucks into the Mississippi River 80 feet below.

This is the landscape you guys are inheriting.

And what I would ask you to do is the same thing I've been asking of everyone in speeches around the country: become more engaged in the civic affairs of this nation. We cannot continue to squander the greatness of America.

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haven't even begun to tap into the intelligence and the explosive creative energy embedded in the heart of this new generation on the American scene.

That's right. You guys.

Don't sell yourselves short. You already have a hell of a lot more clout than the Blacks who refused to ride the segregated buses or tolerate the segregated lunch counters in the 1950s and 60s. And they changed the face of the nation.

You have a hell of a lot more clout and much more in the way of resources than the women, many of them housewives, who stood up and threw off the shackles of sexism decades ago and brought about the feminist revolution that gave young girls and women the freedom and opportunities that they have today.

There are things you can do. And as corny as it sounds, your country, which we should try to think of more as a family, needs you.

You can start by keeping yourselves well-informed about the important issues of the day, and then discussing those matters with colleagues, co-workers, friends, relatives. Pick out an area of particular concern to you, and then pursue it with a real sense of purpose. Offer your services as a volunteer where you think you can make a contribution. Join a local civic organization, or start one. Protest. Demonstrate. Don't just vote for candidates you admire, help them. Work in their campaigns. Run for office yourself. Write letters, articles or speeches. Write a check.

I know that some of you are already active in civic affairs. Become more active. Or help persuade some of your less committed friends and associates to step up. You may find yourselves stunned to see how exhilarating, how exciting and, yes, how much fun it can be to plunge headlong into the important affairs of the day.

Now, while I'm urging you to make this energetic effort to help re-shape and re-direct the destiny of our nation, I'm also going to suggest that you do something that may sound like just the opposite.

I want you to take it easy.

One of the things I've noticed over the past few decades is that life in America has been getting ever more frenetic. A few years ago Americans surpassed the Japanese as the hardest working people on the planet. Many of my friends and colleagues in a variety of professions and occupations have been working longer and longer hours, giving up part or all of their weekends, often sacrificing vacations, and sometimes holding down two or more jobs.

We've got cell phones and Blackberries, and we're emailing and text-messaging and Twittering--actually, somebody told me it's not Twittering, it's tweeting. Whatever it is, it sounds like a nervous disorder. I was reading a newspaper article the other day that asked, "Are you a Facebook user who also tweets?"

It's out of control.



One of the

Bob Herbert joined