
FIRST AMENDMENT TELEVISION

POSITION PAPER

THE PROMISE, THE PROMOTION, AND THE RECORD

America at 250 — What Was Pledged, What Is Sold, and What the Record Shows

PART ONE OF TWO: THE CASE

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“The record is the resistance.”

I. The Question Before the Country

Two hundred and fifty years after the Declaration of Independence pledged that all men are created equal, with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the United States holds more wealth, more military power, and more global influence than any nation in recorded history.

This paper does not dispute that power, nor does it dispute the genuine achievements built upon it. It asks a narrower and more uncomfortable question: across the areas where the nation has made its clearest promises — health, housing, education, public safety, and the defense of those who serve — does the promotion of American success match the documented record?

The method is simple. For each issue area, this paper sets out three things in turn: the civic promise — the expectation embedded in the nation’s founding language and civic mythology; the promotion — the story told about American performance in that area; and the reality, drawn from primary government sources — the Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and the international defense-spending database maintained by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) — each cited to its source.

Every figure in this paper is sourced. Where data is contested or projected, that is stated explicitly. The purpose is not to declare America a failed state — it is not — but to insist that a nation capable of producing the statistics in this paper is also capable of producing better ones, and that the gap between promise and reality is a policy choice, not a law of nature.

II. The Record, Issue by Issue

1. Health Care

The Promise:

The civic expectation, built up over decades of national health policy debate, has been that no family should go without care or face financial ruin because of illness.

The Promotion:

American medicine is described as the best in the world — the destination for patients from every other country.

The Reality:

27 million Americans, or about 8% of the population, were uninsured in 2025, a rate that has held steady for two years.

[CDC, National Health Interview Survey, via Commonwealth Fund, May 2026]

The United States is the only high-income nation among the 13 compared by the Commonwealth Fund in its 2026 report that lacks universal or near-universal health coverage; U.S. life expectancy (79 years) is roughly three years below the comparison-country average.

[Commonwealth Fund, “U.S. Health Care from a Global Perspective, 2026”]

The Congressional Budget Office projects that 2025 Medicaid changes could increase the uninsured population by roughly 10 million over the next decade, and that the scheduled expiration of enhanced ACA subsidies could add about 3.8 million more uninsured people per year.

[CBO, cited in Commonwealth Fund and Fortune reporting, 2026]

The U.S. maternal mortality rate was 17.9 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2024 — essentially unchanged from 18.6 in 2023 — with the rate for Black women (44.8 per 100,000 in 2024) more than three times the rate for White women (14.2).

[CDC/NCHS, “Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States, 2024,” Health E-Stat 113, March 2026]

The United States is the only nation in the Commonwealth Fund’s 2026 cohort of high-income peers without universal or near-universal health coverage — a direct finding of that report, not an inference. The trajectory for 2026 and beyond, driven by the expiration of pandemic-era subsidies and changes to Medicaid eligibility, points toward more Americans uninsured, not fewer, even as overall health spending continues to rise. This is not a snapshot of a system in crisis; it is a system in which the promotion (“the best health care in the world”) and the reality (a shrinking share of the population that can reliably access it, and a maternal mortality rate with the starkest racial gap of any indicator in this paper) are diverging in real time.

2. Defense Spending and the Treatment of Veterans

The Promise:

The national ideal holds that a country which asks its citizens to risk their lives in uniform will, in turn, care for them when they return.

The Promotion:

America’s military is the strongest in the world, and supporting the troops is treated as a near-universal civic obligation.

The Reality:

The U.S. spent \$954 billion on defense in 2025 — 33% of all global military spending, and more than the next six countries combined.

[SIPRI, Trends in World Military Expenditure 2025, April 2026]

An estimated 32,882 veterans experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2024, per HUD’s Point-in-Time Count.

[HUD PIT Count, cited in U.S. GAO-26-107517, March 2026]

Between 2020 and 2024, 174,000 veterans eligible for the VA-HUD Supportive Housing program were never referred into it, and the VA did not document why in 87% of those cases.

[U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-26-107517, March 2026]

The VA reports it permanently housed 51,936 veterans in FY2025, its best result since adopting current tracking methods, while veterans continue to report multi-week to multi-month waits for mental health counseling appointments.

The VA's FY2025 housing numbers represent genuine, documented progress, and this paper does not obscure that. But progress measured in the tens of thousands occurs against a defense budget measured in the hundreds of billions — and against a documented administrative failure (174,000 unrefereed veterans, undocumented reasons in 87% of cases) that GAO itself classified as a systemic gap, not an isolated lapse. The civic ideal holds that service would be honored with care. The promotion is gratitude — parades, ceremonies, public tributes. The reality, by the government's own auditors, is a veteran homelessness population in the tens of thousands and a referral system that does not reliably connect eligible veterans to housing benefits they have already earned.

3. Student Debt, Housing, and the Wage Foundation Beneath Both

The Promise:

The American promise, as popularly understood, is that a generation that works hard and plays by the rules will be able to afford a home and an education without a lifetime of debt.

The Promotion:

Homeownership and a college degree remain marketed as the core of the American Dream and the surest path to a stable life.

The Reality:

Outstanding U.S. student loan debt stood at \$1.66 trillion at the end of 2025, the second-largest category of household debt after mortgages, within an overall household debt total of \$18.8 trillion.

[Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Quarterly Report on Household Debt and Credit, Q4 2025, February 2026]

The share of student debt 90+ days delinquent or in default rose sharply through 2025 — from 0.70% in Q4 2024 to 16.19% in Q4 2025 — as paused federal reporting resumed.

[Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Q4 2025 Household Debt and Credit Report, February 2026]

An average federal student loan payment of roughly \$382 per month is estimated to reduce a typical buyer's home-purchasing power by \$20,000 or more in several states, and to delay a first down payment by more than seven years in states including Mississippi, Washington D.C., New Mexico, and North Carolina.

[Zonda analysis for NewHomeSource, February 2026, drawing on Federal Reserve and Census data]

Median household income rose 411% in nominal terms from 1980 to 2024 — but only about 18% in real, inflation-adjusted terms over those 44 years — growing far more slowly than housing, education, and healthcare costs over the same period, while the share of dual-income households needed to sustain that standard of living rose from roughly 50% to roughly 60%.

[U.S. Census Bureau historical income tables, as analyzed in Landmark Wealth Management, November 2025]

Each of these figures is independently defensible, and the two largest — the \$1.66 trillion balance and the spike in serious delinquency to 16.19% — come directly from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's quarterly household credit report, the primary federal source for consumer debt data. Together, the figures describe a closed loop: income growth has lagged far behind the cost of housing, education, and healthcare for over four decades; the credential that was supposed to compensate for that gap now carries a debt load that is both growing and increasingly delinquent, and that actively delays the next generation's ability to buy the home that cost growth already made harder to afford. The promotion treats home ownership and a college degree as still-functioning ladders. The reality, in the Federal Reserve's own numbers, is that both rungs have gotten further apart at the same time the ladder itself got more expensive to climb.

4. Incarceration

The Promise:

The civic ideal holds that liberty and due process are foundational national values, applied

The civic ideal holds that liberty and due process are foundational national values, applied equally under the law.

The Promotion:

The U.S. justice system is held up domestically and internationally as a model of the rule of law.

The Reality:

As of 2025, the United States had the fifth-highest incarceration rate in the world at 541 per 100,000 — down from the world's highest rate (629 per 100,000) as recently as 2022, a position it had held continuously since 2001.

[World Prison Brief, Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, 2025]

Roughly 1.9 million people are held across federal prisons, state prisons, local jails, and other facilities — with people of color accounting for nearly 7 in 10 of those in prison, and 1 in 81 Black adults currently serving time in state prison.

[Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Prisoners in 2023" and "Correctional Populations in the United States, 2023," 2025, via The Sentencing Project]

The U.S. incarcerates women at the world's highest rate; women make up roughly 15% of the local jail population and 8–9% of the state prison population, with 4–5% of women reporting they were pregnant at the time of incarceration.

[U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-25-106404, 2025]

This is one area where the trend line bends in a more favorable direction — the U.S. incarceration rate has dropped meaningfully since its mid-2000s peak, and this paper states that plainly. But the scale and composition of the remaining population are themselves the story: roughly 1.9 million people remain incarcerated, nearly seven in ten of them people of color, with one in 81 Black adults currently serving time in a state prison alone. A nation with roughly 4% of the world's population continues to hold a top-five share of the world's incarcerated people, and the intersection of incarceration with maternal health — documented in Section II.1 — remains a federal data gap that GAO itself has flagged as unresolved.

Continued in Part Two: The Record and the Reckoning

Part Two addresses what in this paper holds up under scrutiny, what requires care, what was deliberately excluded — and the FATV institutional statement on the gap between promise and reality.

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