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"I want you to get up right now, sit up, go to your windows, open them and stick your head out and yell, 'I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore.' Things have got to change. But first, you've gotta get mad! ... You've got to say, 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!' Then we'll figure out what to do about the depression and the inflation and the oil crisis. But first get up out of your chairs, open the window, stick your head out, and yell, and say it." -- Howard Beale, Network *(1976)*

Imagine a world exempt from parking tickets, where gym membership is free and health care is second-to-none. To receive these benefits, you also only have to work two, maybe three days a week -- a time period during which you will be shuttled around in a nice car. The other days of the week you can spend at home with your family. Luckily, every weekend is a long weekend, and you won't have to be back at work until Tuesday evening.

This job description might seem too good to be true, but for our so-called "representatives" in Congress who enjoy incredible job perks ranging from free meals to membership in swanky health clubs, all at taxpayer expense, it seems that there *is* such a thing as a free lunch -- literally and figuratively!

Congressional salaries are certainly generous enough, with members of Congress receiving $174,000 a year on average, and people in leadership positions making more. However, for many Congressmen who belong to the so-called "millionaires' club," this is negligible in comparison to their net worth. (Senator John Kerry [D-MA], who heads up the club, has a net worth of $167.8 million, while Senator Herb Kohl [D-WI], at the lower end of the spectrum, boasts a net worth of $5.6 million.)

Incredibly, American taxpayers are underwriting lavish perks for these very same millionaires, as well as their congressional cohorts. The perks being enjoyed by those in Congress have provided comic relief for many a talk-show host, but contrast these perks with the plight of the average taxpayer struggling just to make ends meet, and you'll find this is no laughing matter.

For example, while veterans were being forced to suffer poor service and deplorable conditions at Walter Reed Army Hospital, politicians were being whisked up to Ward 72 at the very same hospital via a "golden elevator," where they can enjoy medical treatment surrounded by chandeliers, fine china, and original artwork. Should members of Congress or their staff not be able to make the trip to Ward 72, a private, on-call doctor is also on-hand at the Capitol. Furthermore, while 47 million Americans struggle without any kind of health insurance, those in Congress receive superb, discounted health coverage that cannot be denied them because of their age or a preexisting condition.

On top of their six-figure salaries and the millions in taxpayer dollars spent to maintain offices in their home state and in the nation's capital, Congress also enjoys other benefits such as free life insurance, a generous retirement plan for life, 32 fully reimbursed road trips home a year, and travel to foreign lands. Then there are the "extras," including discounts in Capitol Hill tax-free shops and restaurants, free reserved parking at Washington National Airport, use of the House gym or Senate baths for $100 a year, free fresh-cut flowers from the Botanic Gardens, and free assistance in the preparation of income taxes.

Unfortunately, there's more. While more than 15 million Americans are currently out of work and the rest of the nation is laboring longer hours for less pay, Congress enjoys a three-day, Tuesday-to-Thursday work week. Believe it or not, since returning to session, the only time the House of Representatives has actually voted on a Friday was when they approved a 5.8-percent increase in its own budget.

Then there's the way Congress manages the nation's checkbook, running up deficits and spending outlandish sums of money on pork-barrel projects. If you or I were to manage our finances this way, we'd quickly find ourselves out on the streets.

As for abuses of office, they run the gamut from neglecting their constituencies to engaging in self-serving practices, including the misuse of eminent domain, earmarking hundreds of millions

of dollars in federal contracting in return for personal gain and campaign contributions, having inappropriate ties to lobbyist groups, and incorrectly or incompletely disclosing financial information.

Pork-barrel spending, hastily passed legislation, partisan bickering, a skewed work ethic, graft, and moral turpitude have all contributed to the public's increasing dissatisfaction with congressional leadership. Thus, it is little wonder that a recent CNN poll shows Congress with a 29-percent approval rating. You'd be hard-pressed to find employees with such dismal performance evaluations getting a pay raise of any kind. Conveniently, Congress doesn't have to worry about that since they voted in 1989 to give themselves an automatic raise every year.

Congress *should* be America's representative body, yet too many of its members bear little resemblance to those they have been elected to represent. Many of our politicians live like kings. Chauffeured around in limousines, flying in private jets, and eating gourmet meals, all paid for by the American taxpayer, they are far removed from those they represent. Such a luxurious lifestyle makes it difficult to identify with the "little guy" -- the roofers, plumbers, and blue-collar workers who live from paycheck to paycheck and keep the country running with their hard-earned dollars and the sweat of their brows.

Does this make you mad as hell? It should. There is no reason why the American people should be taking this kind of abuse from people who supposedly are representing them.

The average American understandably feels helpless and disconnected, yet whose fault is it really? As the old maxim goes, people get the government they deserve. For too long, Americans have failed to hold their elected representatives accountable. Thus, the onus is on us, "we the people."

Let this be the starting point for you to turn the television sets off and do something about these problems. Whether or not you agree with their politics, the "tea party" protesters have set a good example for what needs to be done. Get involved. Get organized. Find out who your representatives are. Contact their offices. Review their records. Keep track of what they're doing and how they're voting. Make your voices heard to the representatives who are doing a poor job of representing you, and if they don't listen, take action and remove them from office.

Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. His book The Change Manifesto *is now available in bookstores and online. He can be contacted at johnw@rutherford.org. Information about The Rutherford Institute is available at Rutherford.org.*