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Character Counts! Essay Contest

Fueling the Machine

Human society is a vast machine fueled by trust. That trust can be good and bad; it can lead to strong relationships and fast growth, and it can lead to blind trust in an individual or system that can lead to wars or tragedy. However, trust is a uniquely human characteristic. It's part of what separates us from animals, and it affects our communities from the smallest to the largest scales. In this essay, I plan to explore the upsides and the downsides of trust in the past, present, and the future of human society.

Our nation was built on trust. The American people accepted the Constitution because they trusted that their representatives would not become tyrannical like the British Parliament. The people's trust in past presidents, such as Washington, Lincoln, and FDR, helped ensure the nation's success and growth. Our nation's trust in allies and trade partners allowed us to grow into a global superpower, and our beliefs in democracy and our founding fathers' ideals have allowed us to continue down the path laid out by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

However, not all instances of trust have been beneficial to our nation or the world. Blind trust is a dangerous thing. I believe trust should be more situational based on what I know about myself and the person I am trusting. A clear instance of the dangers of blind trust started World War 1 in 1914, when an assassination of an Archduke led to a snowball effect of alliances piling on alliances, eventually turning what should have been a small conflict into a war on a scale never before seen in human history. The alliances signed between nations meant that Austria-Hungary blindly trusted its allies to fight a war to help them, even though this meant that any country involved in a war inevitably dragged another few along with it. It was the equivalent of a modern pyramid scheme and taught the world a lesson about the dangers of blind trust.

Today, it's easy to see trust across even my local community, though not at the same scale as our nation's construction or a world war. Trust between local governments, businesses, even neighbors help our communities run smoothly and with minimal conflict.

I compete with the local Shotgun Shooting team, the Klamath Basin Top Guns. Many of our practices are made possible with trap and skeet clubs' trust. They generally hand over the keys to the coach, trusting that my coach will keep track of targets thrown and the associated price per target that needs to be paid back to the club. Even without a structured agreement, the local skeet club runs completely on the honor system even with individuals unaffiliated with the team, trusting that users will refill the machines with more clay targets and pay for each round in a communal coffee can.

The honor-system is a purely human invention that separates us from animals. The concept that we take something that benefits us and give away something in a way that hurts us with no impending consequences for not paying is a concept that would blow a squirrel's mind. Something as simple as a community mini-fridge in the Fighter Squadron at Kingsley Field shows how much humans trust each other to be decent people. If a simple Venmo tag and cash jar are all that is needed to maintain a cheap soda supply to a group of hotheaded young fighter pilots, then what is stopping trust between countries, political parties, and individuals? That issue seems to be greed.

Greed seems to be the primary cause of broken trust. A great example of greed breaking down trust is the media. In the last few decades, a general trust of news stations has degraded into a massive divide, separating trust and hatred. No matter someone's political lean, it is likely that they are inclined to trust CBS fully and hate FOX with a burning passion, or vice versa. The main cause of that distrust is the greed involved with the news, and their exaggeration of current events in order to gain more viewing time and therefore more monetization. This widening gap based on greed has led to a distrust in scientists and even scientific studies that deal with any sort of political issue simply because one news station is reporting instead of another. For instance, habitat conservation is considered a very liberal thing, and game management is considered a very conservative field. However, the job descriptions can be very similar. It's just one indicator of how a distrust in biased news stations can lead to people tuning out opposing perspectives.

In the future, the only way to regain a nationwide system of trust that runs on the honor system is to figure out how to eliminate distrust in media, research, governments, and more. So much in society depends on trust - response to disasters, technological advancements, even conservation agencies. They all rely on a system of trust between experts and professionals, government leaders, and the citizens. Without trust, large-scale cooperation is very difficult if not impossible.

However, blind trust needs to be kept in check. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), many corporations, governments, and even individuals will have to choose between a machine or a human's judgement. An overly blind trust in AI and other automated systems could lead to ethical failures or undertrained professionals. For example, universities certifying students for professional degrees will have to trust that their students are doing the work and not ChatGPT or another AI system. A failure on this scale could mean undertrained doctors or underqualified pilots that could put a large number of other people in danger.

Whether creating a great nation or starting a deadly world war, trust has always been an inescapable part of human nature. It is essential at every level of society, from stocking the fighter pilot mini-fridge to creating large scale military alliances. While blind trust in humans or machines could lead to catastrophic societal failures, calculated trust in a situational decision-making process can lead to huge advancements for the human race. I plan to incorporate this knowledge of trust and its advantages and disadvantages into my own life.

I believe that solid relationships are built on trust, from friendships to marriages. Once trust is broken, it takes a lot to rebuild that trust with another person. For that reason, I try to be honest and reliable to the best of my ability, knowing that this helps my relationships stay healthy and grow. This extends into my professional plans as well, because being a trustworthy person is a huge part of keeping a job and advancing a career.

Trust, as a uniquely human behavior, can be found as a key element in almost every decision in society's history. It shaped our past and will determine our future. As long as the flow of trust lasts, the machine of society will continue to turn.