Opinion

Change is never easy, but it's possible By [Robert Reich](http://www.sfgate.com/author/robert-reich/) **May 24, 2013**

Many of you soon-to-be college graduates are determined to make the world a better place. Some of you are choosing careers in public service or joining nonprofit organizations or volunteering in your communities.

But many of you are cynical about politics. You see the system as inherently corrupt. You doubt real progress is possible. "What chance do we have against the Koch brothers and the other billionaires?" you've asked me. "How can we fight against Monsanto, Boeing, [J.P. Morgan and Bank of America](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22J.P.+Morgan+and+Bank+of+America%22)? They buy elections. They run America."

Let me remind you: Cynicism is a self-fulfilling prophesy. You have no chance if you assume you have no chance.

"But it was different when you graduated," you say. "The '60s were a time of social progress." You don't know your history.

When I graduated in 1968, the Vietnam War was raging. Over half a million American troops were already there. I didn't know if I'd be drafted. A member of my class who spoke at commencement said he was heading to Canada and urged us to join him.

Two months before, [Martin Luther King](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Martin+Luther+King%22) Jr. had been assassinated. America's cities were burning. [Bobby Kennedy](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Bobby+Kennedy%22) had just been gunned down. George ("segregation forever") Wallace was on his way to garnering 10 million votes and carrying five Southern states. [Richard Nixon](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Richard+Nixon%22) was well on his way to becoming president.

America was still mired in bigotry. I remember a classmate who was dating a black girl being spit on in a movie theater. The [Supreme Court](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Supreme+Court%22) had only the year before struck down state laws against interracial marriage. My entire graduating class of almost 800 contained only six young black men and four Hispanics.

I remember the girlfriend of another classmate almost dying from a back-alley abortion because safe abortions were almost impossible to get.

I remember a bright young female law school graduate in tears because no law firm would hire her because she was a woman.

I remember one of my classmates telling me in anguish that he was a homosexual, fearing he'd be discovered and his career would be ruined.

The environmental movement had yet not been born. Two-thirds of America's waterways were unsafe for swimming or fishing because of industrial waste and sewage. I remember rivers so polluted they caught fire. When the Cuyahoga River went up in flames, [Time Magazine](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Time+magazine%22) described it as the river that "oozes rather than flows," in which a person "does not drown but decays."

In those days, universal health insurance was a pipe dream.

It all seemed pretty hopeless. I assumed America was going to hell.

And yet, reforms did occur. America changed. The changes didn't come easily. Every positive step was met with determined resistance. But we became better and stronger because we were determined to change.

When I graduated college, I would not have believed that in my lifetime women would gain rights over their own bodies, including the legal right to have an abortion. Or that women would become chief executives of major corporations, secretaries of state, contenders for the presidency. Or that they'd outnumber men in college.

I would not have imagined that 11 states would allow gays and lesbians to marry and that a majority of Americans would support equal marriage rights. Or that the nation would have a large and growing black middle class. It would have seemed impossible that a black man, the child of an interracial couple, would become president of the United States.

I would not have predicted that the rate of college enrollment among Hispanics would exceed that of whites.

Or that more than 80 percent of Americans would have health insurance, most of it through government.

I wouldn't have foreseen that the Cuyahoga River - the one that used to catch fire regularly - would come to support 44 species of fish. And that over half our rivers and 70 percent of bays and estuaries would become safe for swimming and fishing. Or that the portion of children with elevated levels of lead in their blood would have dropped from 88 percent to just over 4 percent.

I would not have believed our nation capable of so much positive change.

Yet we achieved it. And we have just begun. Widening inequality, a shrinking middle class, global warming, the corruption of our democracy by big money - all of these, and more, must be addressed. To make progress on these, and to prevent ourselves from slipping backward, will require no less steadfastness, intelligence and patience than was necessary before.

The genius of America lies in its resilience and pragmatism. We believe in social progress because we were born into it. It is our national creed.

Which is to say, I understand your cynicism. It looks pretty hopeless. But, believe me, it isn't.

Not if you pitch in.

*© 2013* [*Robert Reich Robert Reich*](http://www.sfgate.com/search/?action=search&channel=opinion%2Freich&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Robert+Reich+Robert+Reich%22)*, former U.S. secretary of labor, is professor of public policy at UC Berkeley and the author of "Beyond Outrage," now available in paperback. He blogs at* [*www.robertreich.org*](http://www.robertreich.org)*. To comment, go to* [*www.sfgate.com/chronicle/*](http://www.sfgate.com/chronicle/) *submissions/#1*