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Summer Reading About What Ails America and How to Fix It

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Although the U.S. is only democratic country without guaranteed paid vacations, most Americans manage to find some time during the summer to relax at the beach, at a state park, or in the back yard. Many folks want to spend their vacations just chilling rather than thinking about the problems at work, at home, and in the world. But if you're interested in figuring out the roots of our current economic, social and political crisis, what it will take to fix it, and how you can be part of the solution, here's a list of 15 recent books you might want to take with you.

- Joshua Freeman, ***American Empire: The Rise of a Global Power, the Democratic Revolution at Home 1945-2000*** (2012). Historian Freeman explains how America became the world's most powerful military and economic nation after World War 2, and how America's conservative and corporate leaders used anti-Communism to thwart the expansion of the New Deal. Freeman also shows how the combination of the labor and civil rights movements helped guarantee that post-war prosperity was widely (if unevenly) shared. The Vietnam war was a turning point in many ways, as the U.S. began losing its grip on global domination. Starting in the 1970s, corporate America fought back intensively to regain its political influence at home and to challenge the progressive consumer, labor, environmental, women's rights, and civil rights movements that were democratizing society. The result has been a widening economic divide. The book explores the grand sweep but does so by telling fascinating stories about people and events.
- Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, ***Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer -- and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*** (2011). If you want to learn how the very rich and corporate American used its political influence to create a new Gilded Age of enormous wealth and income disparities, this is the book for you. In the past 30 years, the top 1 percent have enjoyed 36 percent of all the income growth generated in the U.S. economy. The current gap between the 1 percent and the rest of America isn't the result of market forces. It is the result of government policies geared toward the upper, upper class. The authors show how the country's biggest corporations reorganized their political operations -- coordinating their campaign donations, lobbying, creation of think tanks, policy organizations, and front groups -- to be more effective at influencing government policy at all levels. And they show how radical conservatives have replaced moderates in leading the Republican Party, dragging the party more and more to the right. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling has only exacerbated the forces Hacker and Pierson document.
- Sam Pizzigati, ***The Rich Don't Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*** (2013). Pizzigati covers some of the same ground as Hacker and Pierson. After World War Two, strong unions, Keynesian stimulus programs (for road construction and home building, among others), and graduated tax rates expanded the middle class and narrowed the gap between the rich and the rest. Pizzigati argues that we need a new wave of policies that promote prosperity for all rather than for the fortunate few. For practical steps on translating those ideas into policy, read Chuck Collins's *99 to 1: How Wealth Inequality Is Wrecking the World and What We Can Do about It*.
- Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, ***It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*** (2012). These middle-of-the-road think tank experts don't explore the widening economic divide but instead look at the widening political divide between Democrats and Republicans. Our current political stalemate in Washington isn't the result of some generic problem with Congress or the lack of civility in our political culture. It is mostly due, very specifically, to the GOP's dramatic rightward shift. They document that the GOP has moved much further to the right than the Democrats have moved to the left.
- Robert Kuttner, ***Debtors' Prison: The Politics of Austerity Versus Possibility*** (2013). This is the best analysis of how both political parties have wrongly come to embrace "austerity" -- shrinking government in order to reduce debt -- as the

solution to our economic crisis. Kuttner explains why some forms of public debt are OK in order to stimulate the economy and help ordinary Americans burned by private debt -- mortgages, student loans, consumer borrowing -- because of stagnant wages and incomes. He points out the hypocrisy of allowing big corporations to use bankruptcy to walk away from their debts, while homeowners and college students don't get similar treatment. He explains that we need *more* public borrowing and investment to revive a depressed economy. We also to change our policies so that Americans don't get swamped by debt to buy homes and send children to college. This well-written accessible book traces the roots of our misguided thinking about debt to the old debtors' prisons and its current manifestations in the current "Fix the Debt" campaign, a propaganda effort mounted by Wall Street banks and big corporations designed to persuade Americans that we need to reduce taxes on the rich and slash government benefits (including Social Security) for everyone else. Kuttner shows how the campaign for "austerity" serves the interests of the same bankers and financial elites whose actions precipitated the recent economic collapse. But there's a way out, Kuttner says, and he writes America a prescription for reform and renewal that Obama, Congress, and the public should follow.

- Michelle Alexander, ***The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*** (2012). America's ruling class has long used race, religion, and ethnic differences (including immigration) to exploit and divide working people. Alexander's book explores the most recent racist strategy -- the prison industrial complex. America spends more on prisons than on higher education. We have, by far, more people in prison than in any other democratic country and most of the prisoners are African Americans and Latinos, mostly men. Alexander explains how Jim Crow and legal racial segregation have been replaced by mass incarceration. Our criminal justice system, including the "war on drugs" is incredibly racist -- from the laws themselves to the way that cops, judges, and prison officials interpret and implement them. A huge proportion of our society is comprised of prisoners and ex-prisoners, who are discriminated against for the rest of their lives - in jobs, housing, education, voting rights, and other ways. Read this book and then watch Ken Burns' new documentary film "*The Central Park Five*," which tells the story of the five black and Latino teenagers from Harlem who were wrongly convicted of raping a white woman in New York City's Central Park in 1989. This was one of the most racist and gross miscarriages of justice in the nation's history.
- Jonathan Kozol, ***Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America*** (2012). Kozol continues his decades-long examination of the savage economic and racial inequalities that distort our education system. These devastating inequities led to what's now called the "school-to-prison" pipeline. Kozol sees hope in the eyes and minds of America's young people who, if given the opportunity, could fulfill their potential as individuals and as contributing members of society.
- Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, ***The Rich And The Rest Of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*** (2012). No book since Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) has outraged and inspired the general public, politicians and activists to mount a crusade against poverty. Smiley and West hope to follow in Harrington's footsteps. Through their TV, radio, and public appearances, as well as this book, they want to galvanize a new effort to eradicate poverty. Like Harrington, they humanize poverty by telling stories about real people trapped in circumstances not of their own making. With 150 million Americans persistently poor or near poor, Smiley and West argue that eliminating poverty is vital to our nation's future and offer 12 policy ideas to spark a national conversation to address the issue.
- Peter Edelman, ***So Rich, So Poor: Why It's So Hard to End Poverty in America*** (2012). Edelman points out that the 1960s and 1970s "war on poverty" actually made significant progress, but it was stopped in its tracks. If the nation's gross national income -- over \$14 trillion -- were divided evenly across the entire U.S. population, every household could call itself middle class. Yet income and wealth disparity is now wider than at any point since the Great Depression. Wages for more than half of American workers have stagnated. Edelman's book is the best contemporary diagnosis of what lessons we can learn from that earlier war on poverty, how poverty has changed, and what to do about it now. As Edelman explains, the problem is *not* the lack of policy ideas, but galvanizing the political will.
- Tom Diaz, ***The Last Gun: How Changes in the Gun Industry Are Killing Americans and What It Will Take to Stop It*** (2013). Gun violence in the United States (over 30,000 gun deaths a year) has reached epidemic proportions, but it is not an equal opportunity killer. We are regularly shocked by such mass killings as those in Newtown and Aurora, but we take for granted the daily deadly murders in America's poor urban areas, whose victims are disproportionately Blacks and Latinos. Diaz examines how changes within the gun manufacturing industry, and the rise in military-grade gun models, have exacerbated the problem of gun violence. The vast majority of Americans want stronger public safety and gun control laws, but so far the NRA and its allies have thwarted national legislation. Diaz explains where they are vulnerable and how to beat them.
- Jeanne Theoharis, ***The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*** (2013). This biography of Parks reminds us that successful movements rarely happen spontaneously. Parks' refusal to move to the back of the Montgomery bus in 1955 -- which triggered the year-long bus boycott -- was hardly an isolated incident. She was already a veteran activist and civil rights radical, a courageous, determined woman who was widely respected and didn't need (or want) to be the center of attention. Civil rights activists in Montgomery had been talking about a buy boycott for years. Parks' action and arrest galvanized the community, but there was already an infrastructure in place of organizations and activists who knew how to take advantage of the opportunity. This wonderful book recounts Parks' life, especially how her civil rights activism not only encompassed the battle against Jim Crow segregation in schools, jobs, and voting rights, but also the fight against ongoing sexual assaults

of black women by white men. Theoharis also notes the centrality of the Highlander Folk School -- the radical Tennessee training center where Parks attended a workshop a few months before the famous bus incident and returned to many times afterwards -- to the civil rights movement across the South.

- William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (2013). This August 28 is the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington. It is best known for Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It was the largest mass march in U.S. history at that time. It was only possible because there was a powerful grassroots movement engaged in local organizing around the country. It wasn't just a pep rally. It was called a march "for jobs and freedom" in order to link the demand for full employment with the demand for civil rights. It has both a broad vision and a specific set of legislative goals. Jones reminds us that the march was the idea of a small group of veteran radical civil rights and labor activists with years of experience in left-wing causes and strong networks of allies in unions, religious organizations, women's groups, and civil rights organizations. Some of the people who spoke before King focused on those radical demands -- including A. Philip Randolph's call for an end to segregation and a living wage for every American. Jones reminds us that progressive policy happens when radicals and reformers work together to build broad coalitions.
- Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (2013). There's no progress without protest, abolitionist Frederick Douglass said. But how protest begins, grows, and is sustained by social movements is often a mystery. Rome's history of Earth Day's roots and legacy is a fascinating look at how this one-day event in 1970 became a major turning point for the environmental movement. At the time, nobody expected the first Earth Day to play this role, but it helped bring together a burgeoning crusade that was bubbling under the surface around the country. Today's environmental movement involves large and small advocacy and lobby groups, environmental studies programs at colleges, widespread public concern over pollution and global warming, recycling programs in most cities, environmental beats at major media outlets, and major government agencies and policies devoted to environmental protection that didn't exist in 1970. Rome makes the case that the first Earth Day helped create the "first green generation" that has kept the environmental banner flying. His book should be read in conjunction with Robert Gottlieb's *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (2005), which examines the different strands of environmentalism going back to the 1800s, including a radical wing of the movement that linked environmental issues with workers' rights, urban slums, and public health.
 - Robert Pollin, *Back to Full Employment* (2012). Can't find a job? Or a job that pays enough to support yourself and your family? It isn't your fault. Pollin shows that a full employment economy -- a decent job for everyone who wants one -- is possible. Some societies have achieved it and the U.S. has even gotten close. But we've abandoned that goal, and Pollin wants us to get back to it. In this short, concise, and easy-to-read book, Pollins explain how we can do it.
- Gar Alperovitz, *What Then Must We Do?: Straight Talk about the Next American Revolution* (2013). In this visionary but also very practical book, Alperovitz outlines what a more democratic economy could look like. This easy-to-read slender manifesto is full of fresh ideas but most of them are already being tried somewhere in America. Alperovitz documents why our current system of corporate capitalism is crumbling. But this is not a doom-and-gloom book. He also provides concrete, but under-noticed, examples of how it can be changed, such as community-owned and employee-owned enterprises, but expanded beyond the current islands of economic democracy. He shows how this scenario is firmly within America's own version of social democracy. It would make the country a more equal, safer and healthier place to live, promote full employment at decent wages, and protect the environment and consumers from the current system based on corporate greed.

Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His most recent book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012).

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