

TED CONFERENCES

Note From **TED** Conferences Founder Re:
“**U**nder**StA**nding USA” Book & Conference

ISN'T THIS PROJECT SOMEWHAT OUTSIDE THE REALM OF TED EXPERTISE?

“With **TEDX**, MY STAFF WILL BE FAR MORE INVOLVED IN SHAPING THE CONTENT OF THE EVENT THAN WITH ANY OF OUR PRIOR CONFERENCES. TO COMPLEMENT MY ORGANIZATION'S EXISTING STRENGTHS, I HAVE ENLISTED SOMEONE WHOSE CAREER HAS BEEN BUILT AROUND THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMUNICATIONS. **GREGORY PETERSON** HOLDS A LAW DEGREE, A COMMUNICATIONS DEGREE AND A MASTER'S IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FROM HARVARD'S KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT. GREGORY HAS THE DAY-TO-DAY RESPONSIBILITY FOR **TEDX** research and the ***Atlas of Understanding***.”

TED Conferences Founder



TED CONFERENCES

TED CONFERENCE'S "UNDERSTANDING USA" PROJECT WAS AN AMBITIOUS BOOK AND CONFERENCE THAT USED DIRECTED INQUIRIES AND GRAPHIC DESIGN TO HELP "MAKE PUBLIC INFORMATION PUBLIC."

AS THE TED STAFF MEMBER IN CHARGE OF THIS BOOK I SELECTED THE CONTENT, CREATED THE BOOK'S OUTLINE, DIRECTED RESEARCH & WORKED WITH A CADRE OF TALENTED "INFORMATION ARCHITECT" DESIGNERS TO BREATHE LIFE INTO STATISTICAL DATA. I ALSO (GHOST)WROTE THE PROJECT'S "MANIFESTO"—THE KEY DOCUMENT THAT SHAPED THE BOOK AND CONFERENCE.

THE WRITING SAMPLE BELOW IS AN EXCERPT FROM THE INTRODUCTORY COPY THAT LAUNCHED TED CONFERENCE'S "UNDERSTANDINGUSA" PROJECT.

(NOTE: I HAVE UPDATED THIS HYPOTHETICAL TEXT TO BETTER REFLECT THE TONE THAT I WOULD EMPLOY FOR A SIMILAR PROJECT IN TODAY'S POLARIZED POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT.)

OURS IS A SPECIAL MOMENT IN HISTORY. DURING THE EVENTFUL MONTHS AHEAD, POLITICIANS AND PUNDITS WILL BE LOOKING FORWARD; HISTORIANS WILL BE LOOKING BACK. BUT THE TED CONFERENCES CONTRIBUTION TO THIS UNIQUE MOMENT IN TIME WILL BE A MULTI-PART PROJECT LOOKING AT "NOW." A PROJECT DESIGNED TO FACILITATE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMPLEX ISSUES WE FACE IN NAVIGATING THIS UNCERTAIN MOMENT IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA.

IT IS THE CONFLUENCE OF THIS PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION, THIS CRUCIAL MID-TERM ELECTION—AND THE HEIGHTENED PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS THAT WILL ACCOMPANY IT—THAT MAKES THIS MOMENT A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY TO PROMOTE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ISSUES FACING THIS NATION NOW. AND THIS MUCH GOES WITHOUT SAYING: IN THE COURSE OF CIVIC AFFAIRS, TIMING IS EVERYTHING.

WHATEVER YOUR VIEWS ABOUT THE RESULTS OF AMERICA'S MOST RECENT ELECTION SEASON, YOU LIKELY WILL AGREE THAT THE POLITICAL PROCESS ITSELF LEFT A LOT TO BE DESIRED. PERSONAL ATTACKS, SCANDAL-MONGERING AND CAMPAIGNS OF OBFUSCATION—ALL CONSUMED FAR TOO MUCH OF OUR CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS. AND THE WASHINGTON-BASED MEDIA PUNDITS, WHO OFTEN FOCUSED ON THE SENSATIONAL RATHER THAN THE SUBSTANTIVE, CONSISTENTLY MISREAD THE NATION'S ELECTORAL TEMPERATURE. AS A CONSEQUENCE, A SIZABLE PORTION OF THE ELECTORATE SIMPLY TUNED IT ALL OUT. AND WHO CAN BLAME PROSPECTIVE VOTERS FOR NOT PARTICIPATING WHEN THEY DON'T TRUST INFORMATION SOURCES, DON'T UNDERSTAND COMPLEX ISSUES, AND DON'T BELIEVE THAT THEIR PARTICIPATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

ALL TOO OFTEN, OUR FELLOW AMERICANS NEVER REALLY ENCOUNTER (MUCH LESS ENGAGE OR TRULY UNDERSTAND) THE COMPLEX ISSUES THAT SHOULD BE THOUGHTFULLY ADDRESSED PRIOR TO ELECTION DAY. AND WHEN OUR DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES FAIL, THE BIG LOSERS ARE WE THE PEOPLE.

CONSIDER THIS PROPOSITION: IF GIVEN A DIET OF INTERESTING, ACCURATE, AND UNDERSTANDABLE PUBLIC INFORMATION, MIGHT SOME VOTERS BECOME BETTER POLITICAL CONSUMERS? COULD A RISING TIDE OF UNDERSTANDABLE PUBLIC INFORMATION LIFT ALL (OR, AT LEAST, SOME) CIVIC BOATS? THAT'S WHAT WE HAVE IN MIND—A PUBLIC INFORMATION INITIATIVE THAT WILL FOSTER INFORMED DECISION-MAKING FOR THE IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUES.

WE ARE CLEAR-EYED IN RECOGNIZING THAT THERE ARE NO QUICK FIXES FOR THE POLARIZATION OF OUR POLITICAL COMMUNITIES. TRULY, ANY SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT WILL REQUIRE MASSIVE, SUSTAINED EFFORTS FROM PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS. WE JUST WANT TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION, AND IN ORDER TO FOSTER AN IMPROVED STATE OF CIVIC CLARITY WE PROPOSE THIS STRAIGHTFORWARD TOOL: AN "ATLAS OF UNDERSTANDING".

OUR GOAL IS TO MAKE PUBLIC INFORMATION PUBLIC. FIRST, BY SEEKING OUT FACTS THAT ARE CENTRAL TO ANY INFORMED DISCUSSION OF THIS COUNTRY'S PRESSING CIVIC ISSUES. SECOND, BY MAKING THIS CRUCIAL INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE AND UBIQUITOUS AND UNDERSTANDABLE TO AMERICAN CITIZENS.

WILL OUR PROJECT BE ADVOCACY FOR SPECIFIC POLICY POSITIONS? NOT SO; THE ONLY POINT OF VIEW PROPOUNDED BY TEDX IS THE JEFFERSONIAN MAXIM THAT AN INFORMED CITIZENRY IS ESSENTIAL IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY. AGAIN, THE TEDX MATERIAL IS NOT PROMOTING AN AGENDA THAT IS EITHER LIBERAL OR CONSERVATIVE, DEMOCRATIC OR REPUBLICAN. IT SIMPLY AIMS TO HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND CERTAIN SOCIAL ISSUES AS THEY SELDOM HAVE BEFORE.

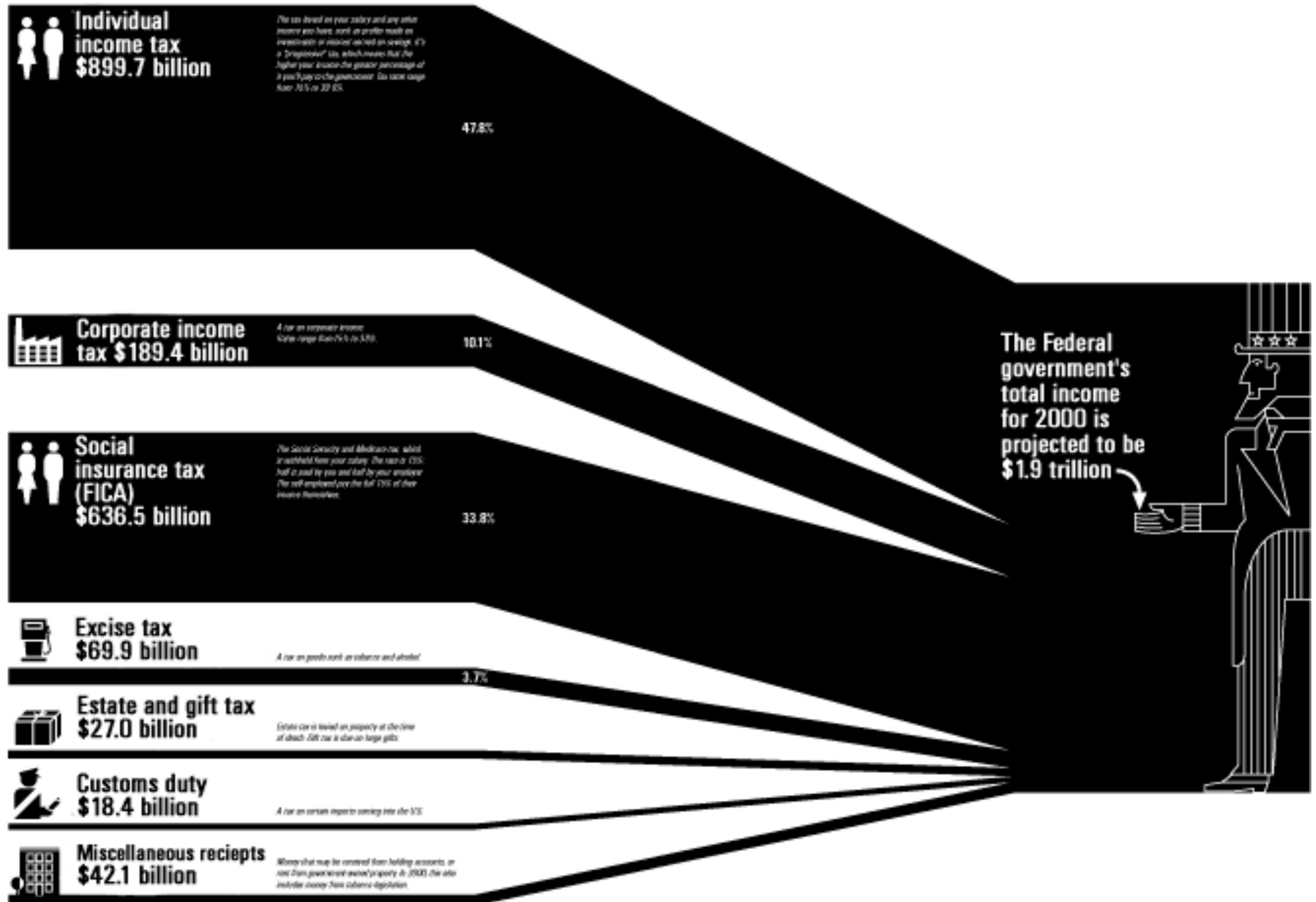
OF COURSE, ONCE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND AN ISSUE IN A NEW WAY THEY MAY WELL DISCOVER MOTIVATION TO ACT UPON THEIR NEW KNOWLEDGE. (OTHERWISE, WHY BOTHER?) BUT YOU GRASP THE POINT: TEDX IS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING RATHER THAN ADVOCACY.

AS FOR THE SUBSEQUENT SPECULATION ABOUT WHAT SHOULD BE OR WHAT COULD BE... WE WILL LEAVE THAT TO THE JOURNALISTS, CANDIDATES, PUNDITS, POLICY-MAKERS AND CITIZENS WHO USE THE TEDX MATERIAL TO FASHION, OR TO REASSESS, THEIR IDEAS, OPINIONS AND POLICIES.

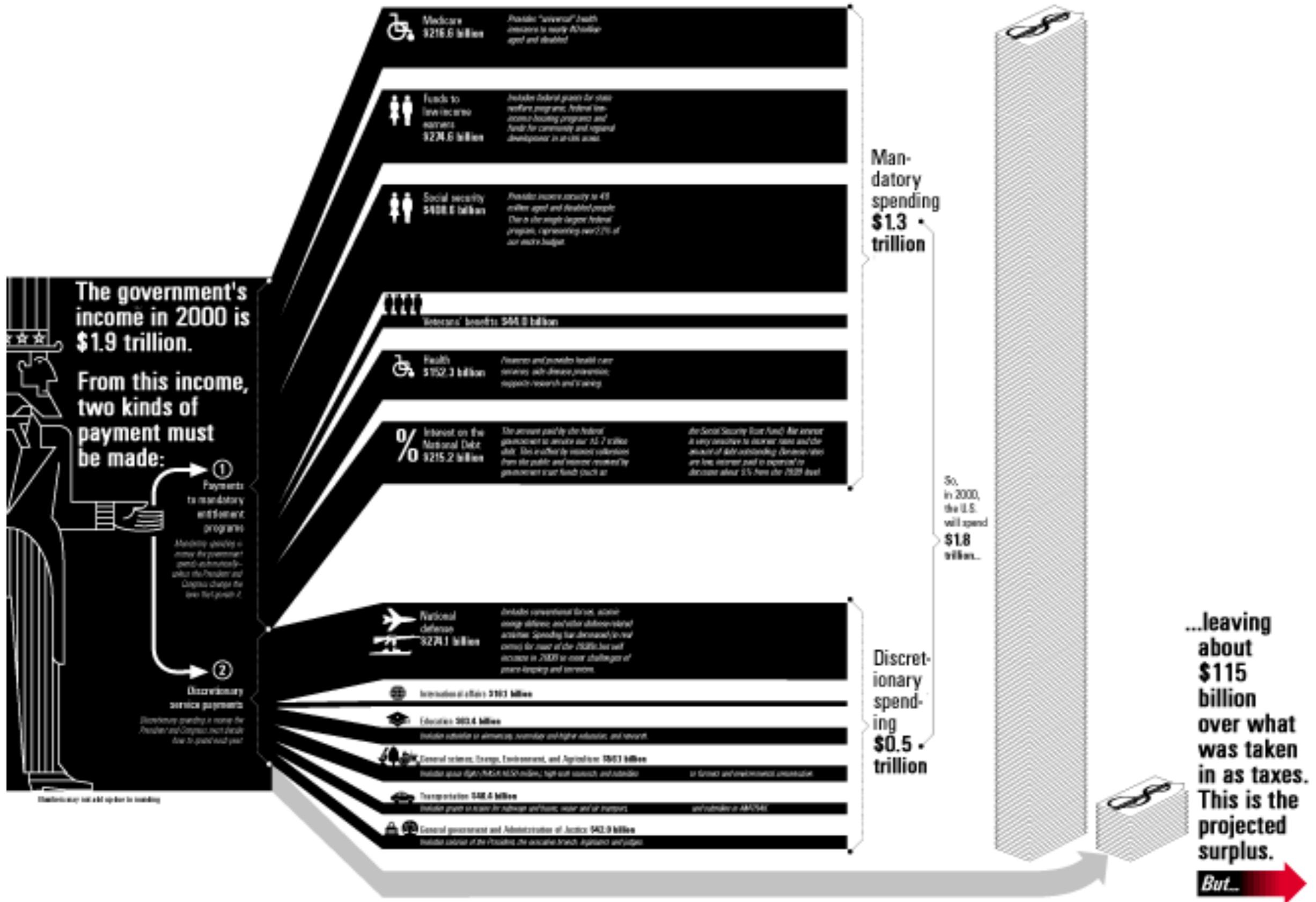
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SHOWN BELOW IS JUST A PARTIAL EXAMPLE OF HOW SIMPLE, EFFECTIVE GRAPHICS CAN BRING DATA TO LIFE. WHILE CONDUCTING THE BOOK'S INITIAL RESEARCH, I FOUND HARVARD STUDENT MEREDITH BAGBY'S INNOVATIVE "ANNUAL REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES"—AND SUGGESTED THAT A GRAPHICS "MAKEOVER" WOULD MAKE THESE DATA FAR MORE ACCESSIBLE. THE RESULT? INFORMATION ARCHITECT NIGEL HOLMES EMPLOYED HIS "EXPLANATION GRAPHICS" WIZARDRY TO BREATHE LIFE INTO OUR REVISED ANNUAL REPORT.

OUR FIRST SPREAD SHOWED MONEY FLOWING INTO THE U.S. TREASURY.



NEXT, WE SHOWED GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES: MONEY FLOWING OUT.



FINALLY, A GRAPHIC SHOWING THE YEAR'S SURPLUS INCOME (HAPPIER DAYS, FROM A BUDGETING STANDPOINT!)—SURROUNDED BY A SEA OF NATIONAL DEBT.

Got an
in-flow
from
your
company
230 million

The **National Debt** is the amount of money the United States has borrowed to finance its annual deficits.

The money is borrowed from two sources:

1. U.S. and foreign citizens and institutions, including foreign governments, that invest in Treasury bills and other securities. This is called *The Debt Held by the Public*.
2. The U.S. government's own assets, such as trust funds for the Social Security and Medicare programs, civil service and military retirement plans, unemployment insurance and transportation funds.

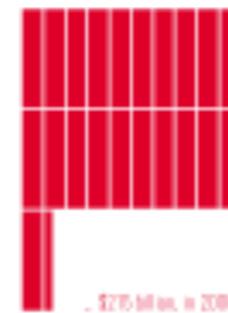
Is the debt dangerous?

Economists argue about whether the debt is bad or good for our economy.

Those who say it's good argue that just like a corporation or a family, America uses debt to grow. For this, we owe most of the debt to ourselves—our own banks, funds and individual investors.

Those who say it's bad argue that there is a real cost of the debt. For instance, each year we pay over \$200 billion just to finance the debt. In 2000, it's our fourth largest federal expense, costing roughly the same amount as the whole Medicare program. In addition, we use a significant amount of money to foreign, not to ourselves.

Just the interest on our debt...

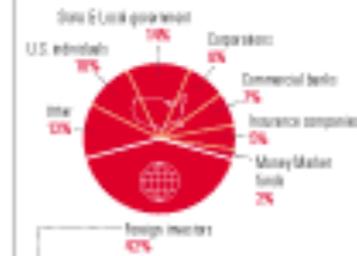


...\$75 billion, in 2000...

...could pay it all the 14 million children living below the poverty line up to a "middle class" living standard.

Who really owns America?

Breakdown of the Debt Held by the Public:



Americans own just 58%. Foreign investors control the rest. The largest purchaser in 1997 was the U.K. with \$170 billion in net purchases, followed by Japan at \$75 billion.



...let's compare the size of the \$115 billion surplus...

...to the \$5.7 trillion NATIONAL DEBT

Estimate of combined annual surplus support if result is possible to pay off the National Debt by 2005. Just to pay deficit or surplus estimate have been accurate.

If the debt was paid down at the rate of a dollar a second, it would take 133,000 years! (The time for the planet Saturn to orbit the Sun.)

It, like all the rest, was each of these was a \$10 billion.

It represents \$1 billion. There are one thousand million dollars in the federal treasury.

THE CONTENT FOR TEDX IS AMBITIOUS – EVEN BY TED STANDARDS. WHAT WE WILL COVER ARE 100 KEY QUESTIONS (AND SEVERAL HUNDRED FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS) ILLUMINATING THE AMERICAN CONDITION AT THIS SPECIAL MOMENT IN HISTORY.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE TRULY CONFIDENT OF THEIR ABILITY TO FIND, MANAGE, EVALUATE AND UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEX INFORMATION NOW REQUIRED TO BE AN EFFECTIVE CITIZEN OF THIS NATION? WITH TEDX, WE AIM TO BOOST CIVIC CONFIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE ISSUES THAT WILL DEFINE THIS NATION'S FUTURE.

JOIN US!

TED CONFERENCES

RESEARCH & WRITING

NEWEST MEMBER OF THE TED CONFERENCES STAFF IS GREGORY PETERSON, A WRITER/LAWYER WHOSE CAREER HAS BEEN BUILT AROUND THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMUNICATIONS. FORMERLY DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS IN A MIDWESTERN STATEHOUSE, HE HOLDS A LAW DEGREE, A COMMUNICATIONS DEGREE AND A MASTER'S IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FROM HARVARD'S KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT. GREGORY HAS THE DAY-TO-DAY RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEDX OPERATIONS.

