



UNDERSTANDING

## **“Understanding USA”**

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**When the great news anchor Peter Jennings died last month, I was amazed to learn how young he was when he first assumed a network anchor position. And I reflected on the one intersection of interests where I might have had an opportunity to meet him. Jennings originally was slated to direct a graphically driven treatment of America’s current events. It’s timing was to coincide with the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution (in 1987), and it was to be designed by the people at TED Conferences. But when the planets didn’t align for that anniversary, the idea lay fallow for years — until the new millennium rolled around. That’s when I became involved in TED’s “UNDERSTANDING USA” project — an ambitious effort using graphic design to “make public information public.”**

**We developed a core list of questions about one hundred current affairs topics, then worked with a cadre of talented “information architects” to breathe life into these data. Managing the book project was an illuminating experience. And TED’s multi-day conferences were master classes in communicating data and ideas — with speakers as diversely gifted as Jane Goodall, Tom Peters, Bill Bradley, Nicholas Negroponte, Forrest Sawyer and many more.**

**Shown below is just a partial example of how simple, effective graphics can bring data to life: 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.**

# UNDERSTANDING



Individual  
income tax  
\$859.7 billion



Corporate income  
tax \$189.4 billion



Social  
Insurance tax  
(FICA)  
\$836.5 billion



Excise tax  
\$69.9 billion



Estate and gift tax  
\$27.8 billion



Customs duty  
\$18.4 billion



Miscellaneous receipts  
\$42.1 billion

The federal  
government's  
total income  
for 2000 is  
projected to be  
\$1.9 trillion



## WHAT THEY'RE SAYING ABOUT "UNDERSTANDING USA"

"TED, held every February in Monterey, Calif., is the first and best of the convergence conferences... The centerpiece of this year's TED was his new "Understanding USA" (<http://www.ted.com/understanding.html>), a thrilling collection of how you can use graphics to describe trends. The book shows, over and over, how the right image can be worth 10,000 words." **CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

"The result of a yearlong crusade... this 324-page, graphic-rich book is designed to provide Americans with the right information, in the right format, in the right amount. This is a book with a mission: to enable people to grasp the world they live in -- including everything from the electoral process and the federal debt to health care and poverty -- quickly, easily, and entertainingly... In a book filled with useful information, no section is more compelling than the chapter that decodes the mysteries of information technology and the information economy.  
**FAST COMPANY**

"“Understanding USA” uses graphic design to make difficult statistical information more accessible. This compendium covers topics ranging from Social Security, the national debt and education to immigration, the environment and crime. This is two part project..Markle is allocating \$165,000 to acquire 10,000 copies of the book version for distribution to high school teachers (through Center for Civic Education), library systems, foundations, think tanks, universities, corporations, journalists, government officials, and new media professionals.”  
**MARKLE FOUNDATION**

"If a picture truly is worth a thousand words, then *Understanding USA* is one of the most comprehensive reference books ever written. Every page is packed with clear, simple graphics designed to break down massive amounts of information into easily digestible bits...Nearly any topic that relates to the U.S. in a broad scale is covered here: financial, social, and political statistics are presented in reasonably clear-cut chapters  
**AMAZON.COM** Editorial Review

Reviewer: **John Bailey** What an amazing book. Incredibly complex and massive information is broken down into easy to understand charts, graphs, and pictures. This book is really about two things - one is understanding various aspects of the United States from politics to demographics to education. The second, is how charts can be designed in creative ways to communicate information. I've used several of the concepts myself at work. Great book.

**Breathtaking**, Reviewer: **David Winograd** I've never had a head for facts and figures which is why statistics of how many of this or the cost of that always bored the pants off of me regardless of how much I could use the information. This book changed all that for me and is the finest example of data visualization I've ever seen.