

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #161

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Veteran Journalist, Author Peter Baker
to Open Global Summit on Monday



It's that time of year again when the Jefferson Educational Society for the next three weeks will bring to Erie major national commentators on the events of the day that affect the region, nation, and world.

In this **Book Note**, I'll give some brief "notes" about several of the upcoming speakers. Next week we'll take a deeper look at Richard Reeves' book ***Of Boys***

and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It. On Nov. 2, I'll look at Robert Garland's ***The Other Side of History: Daily Life in the Ancient World***. And, on Nov. 9, we'll pick up on "Americans and Their Games: Sports In American History and Culture with Part III of the "Sports and the Immigrant's Quest for Inclusion."

NOTE #1: Global Summit XV begins Monday (October 23) at 7:30 p.m. at Gannon University's Yehl Ballroom in the Waldron Campus Center with Peter Baker, the chief White House correspondent for The New York Times. President Joe Biden is the fifth U.S. President Baker has covered. He has also written about Presidents Donald J. Trump, Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Baker will speak about ["U.S. Foreign Policy, Russia-Ukraine, Putin, and Campaign 2024."](#)



The late Erie Morning News Managing Editor Larie Pinteau would have loved Baker. Pinteau famously maintained that a college education got in the way of being an effective journalist. Baker might be living proof of the validity of Pinteau's assertion. Baker attended Oberlin College for two years, but then according to an article in The Oberlin Review it was mutually decided between Baker and the college that he should leave "to get (my) head on straight" because he spent too much time working on the student paper. [1] Baker thought he'd take two years off, but it was 35 years before he returned to receive an honorary doctorate from the school from which he did not graduate because he was too busy learning to be a journalist on the job. Oh, in the intervening 35 years, Baker became a world-class journalist working for The Washington Times, The Washington Post, and The New York Times. [2]

Baker possesses extensive experience covering the White House. For The Washington Post, Baker reported on both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies. He was one of the first to report on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, covered Clinton's impeachment trial and Bush II's misadventures during the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and elsewhere. Baker himself was embedded with the U.S. Marines at the outset of the Iraq War covering it on the ground with U.S. forces. [3] Beginning in late 2016, Baker was assigned to cover the White House by The New York Times. His experience during President Trump's administration led to a book he co-authored with his wife, journalist Susan Glasser, ***The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021***. Previously, he had spent four years with Glasser as Moscow bureau chiefs for The Post reporting on Vladimir Putin's ascension to power and the Russian retreat from democracy. This resulted in a previous book by the Baker/Glasser duo ***Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution***. [4] Baker's

presentation during Global Summit XV will make a nice complement to Fiona Hill's Global Summit XIV presentation on Putin's rise to power.

Given Baker's background, Jeffersonians should be particularly interested in his observations on "U.S. Foreign Policy, Russia-Ukraine, Putin, and Campaign 2024." Regarding foreign policy, Russia-Ukraine and authoritarian strongman Vladimir Putin, from the end of the Obama presidency through the Trump presidency and now into the closing days of year three of the Biden presidency, we've seen American foreign policy yo-yo from a staunch adherence to its historic, rock solid (if often misbegotten) defense of global democracy. America as the front-line defender of democracy had been national policy since the end of World War II. Then during the Trump presidency, we saw – oh, not the abandonment – but a serious shrinking of commitment to that policy only to be followed by a reassertion of that commitment under the Biden administration. However, that reassertion of America's historic commitment has met renewed and escalating right-wing opposition.

Speaking of Ukraine, we also see in 21st century America something we haven't seen since the Nazi appeasers of the 1930s who opposed American opposition to Adolph Hitler's Germany. We see major American political figures and several Republican candidates for the American presidency defending an authoritarian invasion of a democratic society as a mere "territorial dispute" (Ron DeSantis) as some even directly have praised an anti-democratic authoritarian leader. Perhaps a few secretly (some not so secretly) yearn to be one.

But, as they use to say on those all-night TV infomercials, "there's more," for we all should be keenly interested in what Baker has to say about "Campaign '24," which actually began sometime in the winter of 2022-23 if not immediately after the 2020 election when defeated candidate Trump began to assert unsubstantiated claims of a stolen election and voter fraud. "Campaign '24" is shaping up to be perhaps the most important presidential election since 1860, the results of which directly led to civil war.

Why?

In an article in The New York Times, columnist Thomas Edsall lists all the issues roiling America's political waters: abortion, a government shutdown, will MAGA voters turn out in high numbers, a possible Biden impeachment, the Democratic Party's politically naïve left-wing, Kamala Harris, etc., etc. He even mentions the fact that by 2024 over 50% of MAGA supporters will be over 70 and perhaps unable to vote, a factor that I think will be of consequence in 2028 and a major factor in 2032, but perhaps not in 2024. [5]

No, my concerns are different than Edsall's and closer to those Baker has expressed in several recent columns. My concerns are that Americans have

become inured to the scandalous trampling of American traditions perpetrated by an allegedly conservative former president and his supporters. It is a trampling that has been aided and abetted by a media that wants to treat the upcoming election as a more or less typical “political horse race” while avoiding the historic assault on American institutions, including the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021 and a presidential candidate who says it might be time to scrap the Constitution. Regardless of your views on various policy and cultural issues, these are not “normal” political positions. They are reminiscent of nothing so much as the demagogic assertions of 1850s-1860s-era secessionists.

More to the point, Baker points out in two 2023 columns how numb to these issues Americans of all political persuasions have become. In an article on March 30, 2023, commenting on former President Trump’s indictment on criminal charges for allegedly using campaign funds to pay hush money to a porn star to cover a sexual dalliance he had with her, Baker noted:

An American president has been indicted for a crime for the first time in history. So many unthinkable firsts have occurred since Donald J. Trump was elected to the White House in 2016, so many inviolable lines have been crossed, so many unimaginable events have shocked the world it is easy to lose sight of just how astonishing this particular moment really is. ... [6] For all of the focus on the tawdry details of the case or its novel legal theory or its political impact, the larger story is of a country heading down a road it has never traveled before, one fraught with profound consequences for the health of the world’s oldest democracy. [7]

Similarly, Baker is amazed (appalled?) at the blasé attitude most Americans have towards the Republican Party’s inability to manage its own affairs, elect a Speaker of the House, and get to work at the business of governing the country. Instead, we all witnessed something akin to a high school student council food fight and looked the other way indifferent to the potential wreckage unfolding along the Potomac. As Baker says:

As the nation’s capital seemed to be barreling toward another debilitating federal government shutdown this weekend, America, well, did not exactly seem to be on the edge of its collective seat. ... Judging by Google search trends, at least, Americans in the days leading up to the shutdown-that-wasn’t were more curious about who shot Tupac Shakur, who might win “The Golden Bachelor” and who would claim the giant Powerball jackpot. Even National Coffee Day 2023 generated more searches at one point than the possible government shutdown. ... America, it seems, has come to expect crisis. In an era of disruption and polarization and insurrection, with a former president facing 91 felony counts in four criminal indictments and a sitting president facing an impeachment inquiry and a House speaker facing a possible move to oust him, the

country has grown accustomed to chaos in the capital. Dysfunction is the new normal. [8]

To hear more in-depth insights from Peter Baker on the current status of the American presidency and our current political strife, you can hear him at Gannon's Yehl Ballroom in the Waldron Campus Center on Monday (Oct. 23) at 7:30 p.m.

NOTE #2: Global Summit XV's "Week One" continues with a mid-day session (special time: 1 p.m.) at Gannon University's Yehl Ballroom with a discussion between Bruce Katz and Richard Florida. Katz is no stranger to Erieites and Jeffersonians, having made multiple appearances in Erie during the past decade coaching local leaders on how they might capitalize on recent changes in the tax code and governmental largesse to jumpstart Erie's urban revival. The revival continues to hum along the State Street corridor from 18th Street north to Presque Isle Bay, but nowhere so impressively as between Perry Square and the bay as the work of the Erie Downtown Development Corporation (EDDC) begins to come to fruition.



If Katz, however, is the tactician coaching Erie leaders, then Richard Florida is the strategist whose early 21st century prescription for urban revival provided the EDDC with its guiding vision. Previously a professor of Regional and Economic Development at Carnegie Mellon University and currently a University Professor at the University of Toronto's School of Cities and Rotman School of Management, and a Distinguished Fellow at New York University's Schack School of Real Estate, Florida is an academic rock star who

successfully straddles the town-gown divide and in doing so has earned himself a small fortune. He self-identifies as an "author, thought leader, and researcher." [9]

Florida's 2002 bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class* focused on an already developing trend asserting that the key to a region's economic future was the clustering of creative young people and cutting-edge tech workers in metropolitan areas where their cross-fertilizing of ideas and innovations would drive economic revival and prosperity. It was the "eds & meds" notion writ large. He said cities needed to focus "on the three T's: technology, talent, and tolerance." [10] While not original to Florida, he summarized it with such eloquence and energy that it became the guiding philosophy of early 21st century urban development. Think of Pittsburgh's post-steel industry revival driven by the University of Pittsburgh and its medical center, Carnegie Mellon University, and the burgeoning tech center around its Bakery Square. Similarly,

think of downtown Erie's nascent revival driven by Erie Insurance, UPMC Hamot, and Gannon University.

The concept works – look at Erie, look at Pittsburgh, look at Cleveland, look at Buffalo's revival – to name only regional examples. But in working, Florida's concept has come under criticism as a cover for gentrification and an economic revival that largely benefits the already wealthy, encourages real estate speculation, and exports urban ills to nearby suburbs. It has also recently been linked to the urban vs. rural divide vexing current American politics as rural residents feel left out of their region's economic bounce-back and dissed by their "creative" and cosmopolitan urban cousins fueling much of America's populist rage. The latter strikes me as a bit much to lay at Florida's feet, but in his follow-up book ***The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class – and What We Can Do About It*** (you gotta love academic titles – pithiness is not their chief virtue) he addressed these issues arguing that inclusiveness must be an essential part of any prosperity.

So, for a frank and almost certainly entertaining look at the challenges of urban development, suburban renewal, and the need to include all of a community's people in its renaissance and what it means for Erie, you'll want to hear Bruce Katz and Richard Florida at Gannon's Yehl Ballroom in the Waldron Center on Thursday, Oct. 26 at 1 p.m.



NOTE #3: Other "Week One" speakers at Global Summit XV include Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the physician who uncovered the Flint, Michigan water crisis. Hanna-Attisha will speak Tuesday at 7 p.m. (a special time) at the Warner Theatre. She told the National Institute of Health's Eric Bock "When I heard about lead, my life changed. ... I became really consumed with what was happening with my Flint kids and how to best protect them." [11] A pediatrician, Hanna-Attisha will be

discussing her book ***What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City.***



At 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 25, Brian Freedman will discuss his book ***Crushed: How a Changing Climate Is Altering the Way We Drink – and Eat.*** A travel writer and expert on the wine industry, Freedman garnered this praise from Publisher's Weekly, which said in its review "Freedman's knowledge of the industry is encyclopedic, his predictions are fascinating (growers are hoping Scandinavia may be "the next big thing in the world

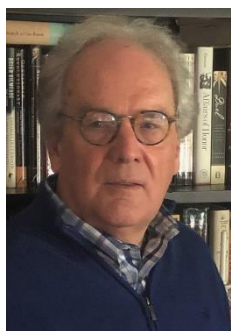
of wine”), and his stories hit home as they reveal producers’ ingenuity and tenacity “to not just survive in this brave new world but to thrive.” For oenophiles and anyone interested in ways climate change is affecting what’s on the table, this is a must-read.” [12]



“Week One” concludes on Friday, Oct. 27 at the Jefferson Educational Society at 7:30 p.m. with Matt Weidinger’s examination of ***Poverty In America: Measurement, Politics, and Progress***. Weidinger is a senior fellow and Rowe Scholar in opportunity and mobility studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where his work is primarily focused on safety-net policies, including cash welfare, child welfare, disability benefits, and

unemployment insurance. Weidinger served as the deputy staff director of the House Committee on Ways and Means and as the longtime staff director of its Subcommittee on Human Resources.

Hope to see you somewhere next week at Global Summit XV. Next Thursday I’ll preview Richard Lesser of the Boston Consulting Group on artificial intelligence, resiliency and leadership today and tomorrow; Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution on why the modern male is struggling and what to do about it; and an evening with The Atlantic’s Tom Nichols.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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End Notes

1. MacPhail, Katherine, “Off the Cuff with Peter Baker, Commencement Speaker and Chief White House Correspondent for The New York Times” in **The Oberlin Review** (June 4, 2021) available [here](#) accessed October 8, 2023.
2. Ibid.

3. Calderone, Michael. "WaPo's Baker joins the NY Times" at **Politico** (May 11, 2008) available [here](#) accessed October 8, 2023.
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5. Cf. Edsall, Thomas, "This Is Going to Be the Most Important Election Since 1860," **The New York Times** (September 27, 2023) available [here](#) accessed October 8, 2023.
6. Baker, Peter, "A President Faces Prosecution, and a Democracy Is Tested," **The New York Times** (March 20, 2023) available [here](#) accessed October 8, 2023.
7. Ibid.
8. Baker, Peter, "To Many Americans, Government Dysfunction Is the New Normal," **The New York Times** (Oct. 1, 2023) available [here](#) accessed October 15, 2023.
9. "Richard Florida..." at **Creative Class Group** available [here](#) accessed October 15, 2023.
10. Gelinas, Nicole, "Why America's Great Cities Are Becoming More Economically Segregated" (review of the **New Urban Crisis** by Richard Florida) **The New York Times** (June 26, 2017) available [here](#) accessed October 15, 2023.
11. Bock, Eric, "Pediatrician Who Uncovered Flint Water Crisis Recounts Experience" in **NIH Record** (April 30, 2021) available [here](#) accessed October 15, 2023.
12. "Crushed: How a Changing Climate Is Altering the Way We Drink" in **Publisher's Weekly** available [here](#) accessed October 15, 2023.

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