

The United States of Excess: Gluttony and the Dark Side of American Exceptionalism

By Robert Paarlberg

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Compared to other wealthy countries, America stands out as a gluttonous over-consumer of both food and fuel. The United States boasts an obesity prevalence double the industrial world average, and per capita carbon emissions twice the average for Europe. Still worse, the policy steps taken by America in response to obesity and climate change have so far been the weakest in the industrial world. These aspects of America's exceptionalism are nothing to be proud of.

Is it possible that America is hard-wired to consume too much food and fuel? Unfortunately, yes, says Robert Paarlberg in *The United States of Excess*. America's excess is driven in each case by its distinct endowment of material and demographic resources, its unusually weak national political institutions, and a unique political culture that celebrates both individual freedoms over social responsibility, and free markets over governmental authority. America's over-consumption is shown to be over-determined.

Because of these powerful underlying circumstances, America's strongest policy response, both to climate change and obesity, will be adaptation rather than mitigation. As the damaging consequences of climate change become manifest, America will not impose adequate measures to reduce fossil fuel consumption, attempting instead to protect itself from storms and sea-level rise through costly infrastructure upgrades. In response to the damaging health consequences of obesity, America will opt for medical interventions and physical accommodations, rather than the policy measures that would be needed to induce better diets or more exercise.

These adaptation responses will generate serious equity problems, both at home and abroad. Responding to obesity with medical interventions will fall short for those in America most prone to obesity - racial minorities and the poor - since these groups have never enjoyed adequate access to quality health care. Responding to climate change by building more resilient infrastructures at home, while allowing atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ to continue their increase, will impose greater climate disruption on poor tropical countries, which are far less capable of self-protection. Awareness of these inequities must be the starting

point toward altering America's current path.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Kudos to Robert Paarlberg for his shrewd, creative, and readable analysis of the political and cultural forces that had made it so difficult to meet the parallel challenges of climate change and the obesity epidemic."--
Michael F. Jacobson, Executive Director, Center for Science in the Public Interest

"This book is vintage Paarlberg: extensive research, elegant writing, and fresh thinking that goes against the grain. This is also probably the most significant book yet from his distinguished career. I hope his pessimistic analysis proves to be wrong, but proving that will be a tall order. In any case, we cannot afford to ignore it. The two phenomena he treats together so insightfully are vital for America and the world."--John S. Odell, University of Southern California, and author of *egotiating the World Economy*

"Professor Paarlberg provides a sobering analysis of the utter failure of America as a nation to deal with the twin challenges of climate change and epidemic obesity. Whether or not one agrees with his conclusions regarding the appropriate combination of prevention and adaption, anyone seeking to address these challenges will benefit from his description of the uniquely American combination of geographical, political, and cultural barriers to action."--Walter Willett, Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health

"Americans consume far too much food and fuel--more than others do. Paarlberg here explores the deep-seated attributes of American circumstances, institutions, and culture that lead to this high consumption and make it so difficult to change, despite its costs at home and abroad. In Paarlberg's hands food and fuel illuminate brilliantly some negative aspects of American exceptionalism."--Richard N. Cooper, Boas Professor of International Economics, Harvard University

"A creative assessment of the inability or unwillingness of the United States to address pressing environmental issues. By considering the overconsumption of both fuel and food in the United States, Paarlberg is able to show how these two mostly unconnected issues spring from similar aspects of American demographics and political culture."--Elizabeth R. Desombre, author of *omestic Sources of International Environmental Policy*

About the Author

Robert Paarlberg is a Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College and Adjunct Professor of Public

Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. He has been a member of the Board of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the National Research Council and a consultant to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development, the International Food Policy Research Institute, and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations.

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