

Why Engineers -- or Anyone -- Should Care about Politics

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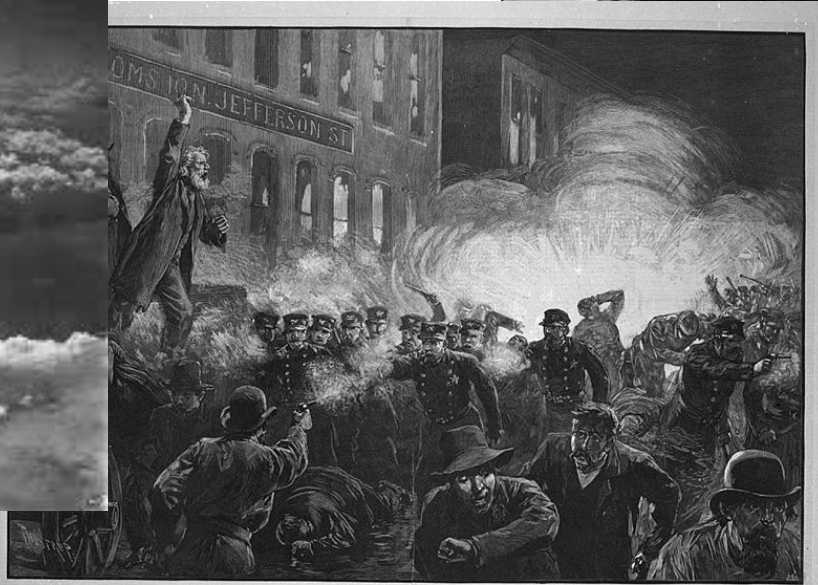


"Turn on to politics, or politics will turn on you."

-- Ralph Nader

Outline of presentation

1. Definition of politics
2. Four reasons why you should care about politics
3. Now that you care, what you can do about politics
4. Further reading



THE ANARCHIST RIFLE IN CHICAGO—A DYNAMITE BOMB EXPLODING AMONG THE POLICE—DROVE BY U.S. TROOPERS AND PATRONS AND DEMONSTRATORS TO H. JOHNSON—(See Page 101.)



What is Politics? Some definitions:

- **Wikipedia:** "a process by which groups of people make collective decisions."
- **Princeton WordNet:** "social relations involving intrigue to gain authority or power"
- **Me:** The acquisition, maintenance, and exercise of power.

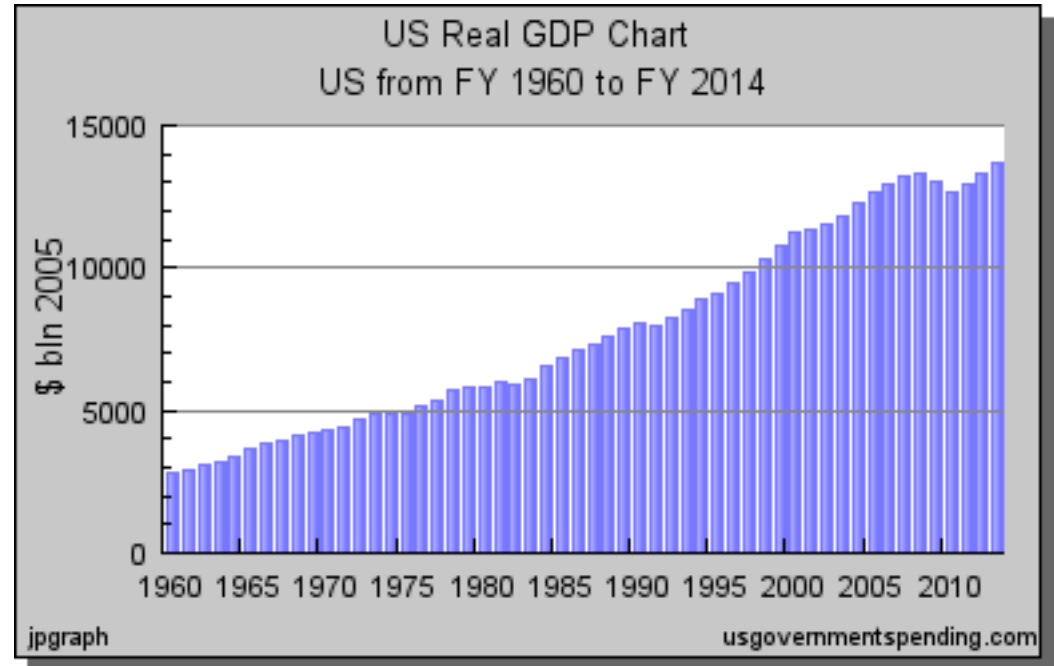


Why you should care, reason 1

**You're
getting
screwed**

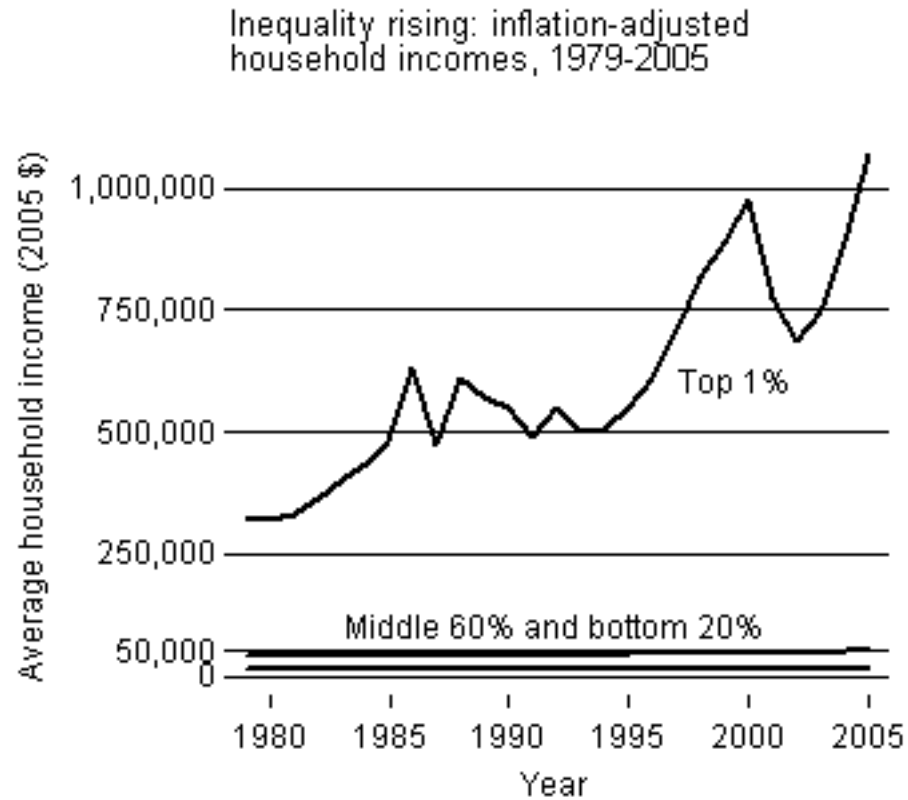
Real wages have been stagnating or declining over 30 years, while GDP has grown

**Real Average Hourly Earnings:
January 1964-October 2005**



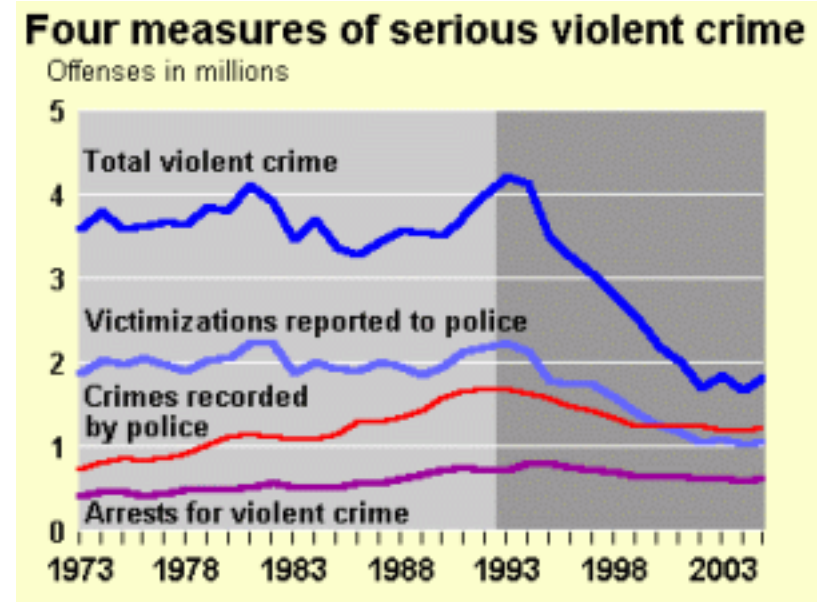
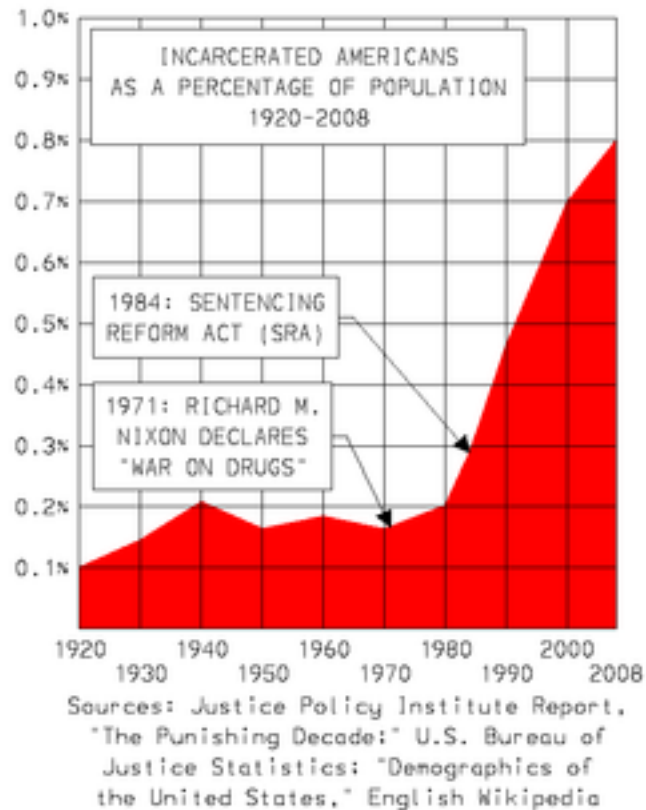
Sources: [one](#) and [two](#)

Inequality is increasing



[Source](#)

The prison population is skyrocketing (while crime is decreasing)



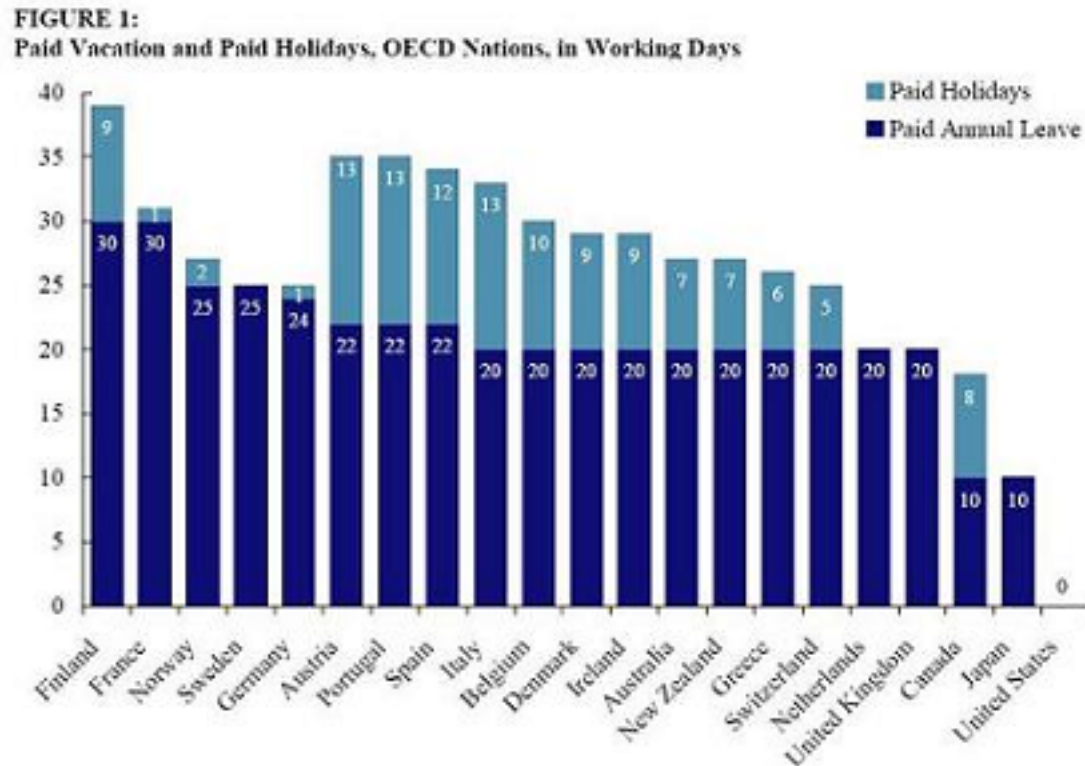
Source: [one](#) and [two](#)

Have fun getting a job...

- United States unemployment rate: ~10%
- California unemployment rate: ~12.5%
- And these are official figures -- they do not include the underemployed nor those who have stopped looking for work



... or a vacation



"The United States is the only advanced economy in the world that does not guarantee its workers paid vacation."

Source: "No-Vacation Nation," Center for Economic and Policy Research

And so on

- [Declining education](#) relative to rest of the world
- Endemic in [house foreclosures](#)
- Impending [evisceration](#) of social security benefits
- Transfer of public funds to private hands via [massive bailouts](#)

Does any of this sound like something you want?

Why you should care, reason 2

You're
screwing
others

War in Afghanistan

- [1000](#) dead American soldiers, many more wounded
- Order of magnitude more [Afghan civilian casualties](#)
- Cost: at least [one trillion dollars](#) (that's a million millions that you're paying)
- Illegal, according to international law ([aggressive invasion](#))
- Hypocritical: the US harbors plenty of known international terrorists such as [Orlando Bosch](#) and [Emmanuel Constant](#)
- [Numerous atrocities](#)



What do Afghans think?

- Malalai Joya: "It was obvious from the very first days that the United States had compromised the rights of Afghan women by supporting some of the worst enemies of women that our country had ever seen."
- "The great majority [of Afghans] strongly disagrees with the US-NATO focus of further militarization of the conflict, and appears to believe that peace is possible with a turn toward diplomacy and negotiations."

Source: [Hopes and Prospects](#)
p.247 and p.243



War in Iraq



- Over [one million](#) Iraqi deaths, [millions more](#) displaced
- [~4000](#) American deaths
- Illegal, according to international law ([aggressive invasion](#))
- All pretexts for war collapsed: no Saddam/Al-Qaeda link, no Weapons of Mass Destruction
- Nir Rosen: "The American occupation has been more disastrous than that of the Mongols, who sacked Baghdad in the thirteenth century." Source: [Hopes and Prospects](#) p. 126
- Fallujah residents suffering [Hiroshima-like ailments](#) from US destruction of the city_

What do Iraqis think?

- "Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic groups believe that the US military invasion is the primary root of the violent differences among them, and see the departure of 'occupying forces' as the key to national reconciliation." Source: [Hopes and Prospects](#), p.130



Do these wars "make us safe"?

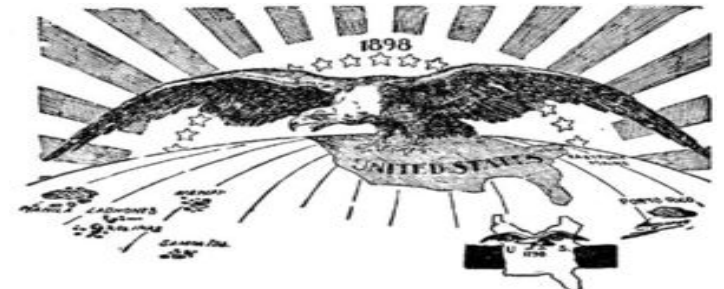
- On the contrary, they increase the enmity towards the US
- Bombing and invading countries and supporting brutal regimes to control the natural resources of a region (surprise) makes [the population resentful](#)



- [2004 Pentagon study](#): "Muslims do not 'hate us for our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies."
- The National Security Council [gave](#) a similar answer to Eisenhower in 1958

US imperialism is hardly new

A (very) small sample:



Ten thousand miles from tip to tip.—Philadelphia Press.

- [Overthrow](#) of Iranian democracy in 1953
- [Overthrow](#) of Guatemalan democracy in 1954
- [Overthrow](#) of Chilean democracy in 1973
- [Invasion](#) of Panama in 1989
- Death of half a million children due to [sanctions](#) on Iraq after first US [invasion](#) of Iraq in 1990
- Attempted [overthrow](#) of Gazan democracy in 2007

For more examples, see [Overthrow](#) by Steven Kinzer and [Killing Hope](#) by William Blum

Increasing US military activity in Yemen

- The US has been launching missile strikes into Yemeni territory
- Obama is reviewing deploying hunter-killer special forces into Yemen under CIA direction
- The US is sending unmanned predator drones into Yemen



Impending war with Iran

- The US is [shipping](#) massive "bunker buster" bombs to Diego Garcia and US battleships have been [reported](#) to cross the Suez Canal into the Red Sea
- Obama has [asserted](#) the right to bomb Iran with a first strike nuclear attack and nuclear submarine tenders are [headed](#) to Diego Garcia



Spillover of Afghanistan war into Pakistan

- Obama has been escalating the use of unmanned drone attacks in Pakistan, with almost 2000 dead, against the wishes of the Pakistani government
- US special forces regularly make raids into Pakistan



More gifts from the Nobel Peace laureate

"Beneath its commitment to soft-spoken diplomacy and beyond the combat zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Obama administration has significantly expanded a largely secret U.S. war... Special Operations forces have grown both in number and budget, and are deployed in **75 countries**." Source: [Washington Post](#)



Torture



- [Case study](#): **Omar Khadr**
- 15 years old at time of capture
- First trial of child soldier since World War II by any country -- trial [condemned](#) by the United Nations
- Evidence being used in military commission at Guantanamo Bay (read: show trial) obtained by torturing Khadr
- [Many other stories](#) similar to Khadr's

US weapons shipments

The United States, when not directly involved in military conflict, often perpetuates it with weapons shipments to the offending parties

- [Israel](#) -- brutally occupying Palestinian land
- [Colombia](#) -- repressing peasants using chemical warfare
- [Turkey](#) -- terrorizing the Kurdish population
- etc.



And so on

- [Extraordinary rendition](#)
- [Military tribunals](#)
- [Neoliberalism](#) / "Free trade" agreements
- [Deadly sanctions](#)
- [Diplomatic support](#) for other states' criminal activities
- etc.

**Does it bother you that children
are being tortured in your name?**

Why you should care, reason 3

**Your rights
are
vanishing**

Due Process

Obama has [authorized](#) the assassination of US citizen Anwar al-Awalaki for engaging in constitutionally protected speech.

That is, a death penalty imposed on a US citizen without any due process whatsoever.



Right to privacy

- [NSA warrantless wiretapping program](#): no search warrant required to monitor your email, phone calls, Internet activity, text messaging, etc. The EFF [calls](#) it a "massive program of illegal dragnet surveillance"
- [Patriot Act](#): one of the provisions allows National Security Letters -- like a subpoena, except no probable cause nor judicial oversight needed



Right to political speech

- FBI (read: national political police) [harassment](#) of pro-Palestinian and pro-Colombian-peasant activists
- Preemptive [arrests](#) of suspected future protesters Minnesota ahead of 2008 Republican National Convention
- Historical: murder of [Fred Hampton](#) under [COINTELPRO](#) program



And so on

- [Right to travel](#)
- [Right to a fair trial](#)
- [Right to vote](#)
- etc.

Are you next on the presidential assassination list?



Why you should care, reason 4

The survival of the
human race is by
no means certain

Nuclear weapons

- In 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the world was **one word** away from a nuclear war (fortunately, [Arkipov](#) didn't launch the missiles) Source: [Hegemony or Survival](#), p.74
- Many other [examples](#) of close calls
- Leaders are not always rational (e.g. Nixon's [Madman Theory](#))
- "The potential for an accidental or unauthorized nuclear missile launch in Russia or the United States has grown over the past decade despite warmer US-Russian relations." Source: [Hegemony or Survival](#), p.221



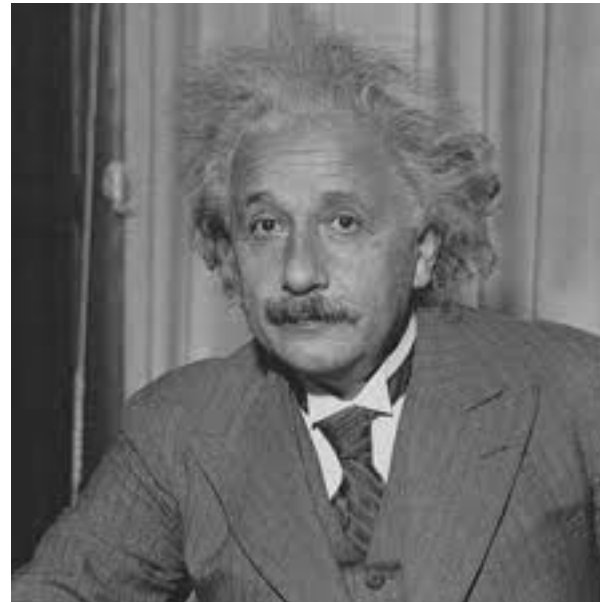
Nuclear weapons (cont.)

- An easy way to mitigate the threat of proliferation would be to establish Nuclear Weapons Free Zones, but the US [prevents](#) implementation of them in Africa (Diego Garcia) and the Middle East (Israel)
- More states are getting nukes, often with US help or cover (Israel, Pakistan, India) and refuse to sign the [NNPT](#)
- "We are running an unnecessary risk of an Armageddon of our own making." -- US Senator Sam Nunn, cited in [Failed States](#) p.14



The Russell-Einstein Manifesto

"It is feared that if many H-bombs are used there will be universal death, sudden only for a minority, but for the majority a slow torture of disease and disintegration... Here, then, is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: **Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?**"



Abuse of the environment

Even if nuclear weapons disappeared, there are plenty of longer-term threats to human survival, like anthropogenic climate change. Immediate consequences could include

- Severe reduction in water supply
- Melting of Arctic ice sheets
- Dramatic temperature changes



Again, the US is the world leader in ignoring threats to human survival.

Source: [Failed States](#) p.16-18 and [Hegemony or Survival](#), p.3

And so on

- Militarization of space
- Vaccine-resistant biological weapons

Source: [Hegemony or Survival](#), p.225-233

The most important point of the presentation

*All of these problems will worsen until **you** decide to do something about them!!!*

But what to do?

True long lasting positive change will come about the same way it always has: **popular movements**.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." -- Margaret Mead



Past victories: civil rights

- You probably know the names of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. These people, while certainly important, would not be as well known if they did not have a mass movement backing them.
- Many organizations involved: SNCC, CORE, SCLC, etc.
- *Brown v Board of Education* was the result of decades of struggle (and required additional popular pressure to implement it!).



Past victories: women's rights

A small sample of achievements:

- 1920: 19th Amendment passed, granting women's suffrage
- 1969: California is first state to adopt "no-fault" divorce law
- 1973: Roe v Wade, granting right to legal abortion
- 1993: North Carolina is last state to remove spousal rape exception



Past victories: labor rights

- 1935: [Wagner Act](#) (protected a worker's right to join a union without harassment and bargain collectively)
- 1938: [Fair Labor Standards Act](#) (enacted minimum wage, limited child labor)

A good introductory history to these and other popular struggles is Howard Zinn's [A People's History of the United States](#)



First step: be informed

Diversify your information sources! Remember, every media outlet has its own bias. For instance, US corporate media (e.g. NYT, NPR, Fox, CNN) will rarely offer any principled criticism of US policies.

A few outlets I read:

- Community media (i.e. no corporate sponsorship and therefore influence): Democracy Now, KPFA
- International media: Al-Jazeera, UK Independent, Haaretz
- Blogs: Glenn Greenwald, Chris Floyd, Mondoweiss



First step: be informed (cont.)

Read, read, read! Some more of my favorites:

- Book authors: [Noam Chomsky](#), [Christopher Hitchens](#)
- Business press: [Wall Street Journal](#), [Forbes](#)
- Magazines: [The Nation](#), [Counterpunch](#)
- Aggregators: [Metafilter](#), [Common Dreams](#)
- [Wikipedia](#) is often the best place to quickly learn about current events

(And remember, everyone has their own biases -- why are you even trusting me to recommend literature to you?)



First step: how NOT to be informed

- Watch cable news 24/7 (often a scream fest full of ad hominem attacks, non sequiturs, issue avoidance, [concision](#), etc.)



- Read only one particular ideology's literature, ignoring everyone else's perspective

Next step: find people interested in the same stuff as you



EMAIL ALOKV3@STANFORD.EDU FOR MORE INFORMATION

NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL GROUP OF
THOUGHTFUL, COMMITTED CITIZENS CAN
CHANGE THE WORLD, INDEED, IT'S THE ONLY
THING THAT EVER HAS.

MARGARET MEAD

calling all stanford activists
STANFORD STUDENTS FOR QUEER LIBERATION PRESENTS

STANFORD
ACTIVIST
MIXER

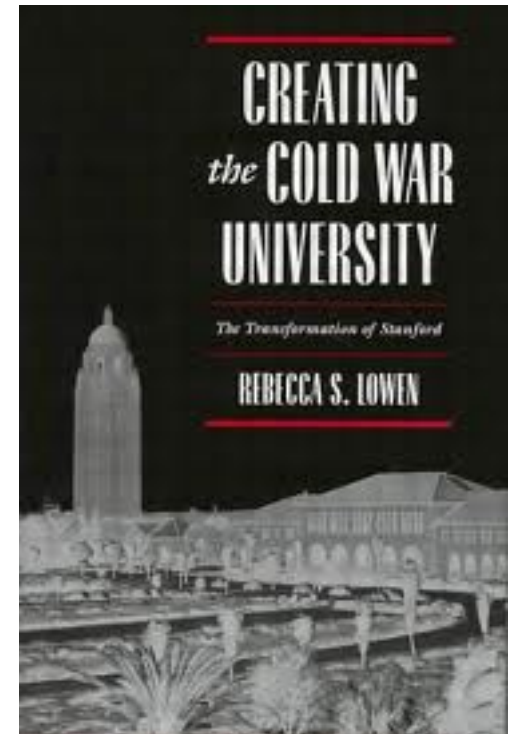
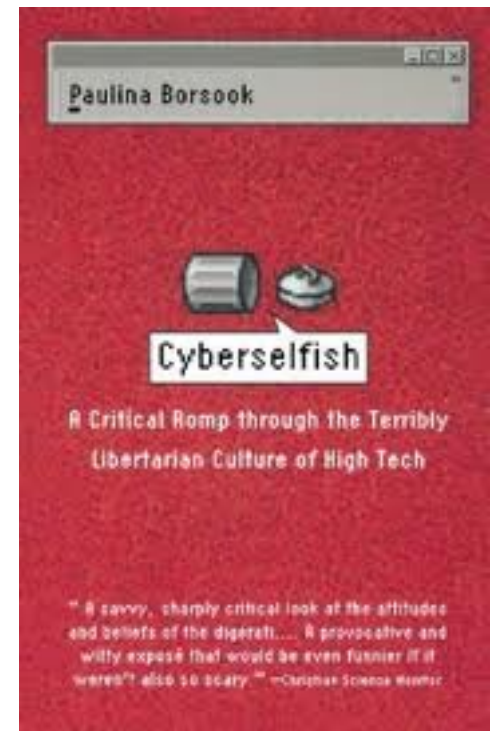
IMMIGRATION
QUEER LIBERATION
PRISON REFORM
RACIAL JUSTICE
FEMINISM
ECONOMIC JUSTICE
ANTI-WAR
HUMAN RIGHTS
& MORE

4PM
SATURDAY, NOV 13
COLUMBAE LAWN
FOR NETWORKING & COALITION BUILDING

Next step: Get involved in your community!

There are plenty of local issues involving Stanford / Bay Area / Silicon Valley

- Stanford's anti-free speech [codes](#)
- Stanford's online copyright policies (file sharing)
- Stanford [and ROTC](#)
- War crimes accountability ([Condoleezza Rice](#), etc.)
- [Oscar Grant](#) / police brutality
- And so much more!



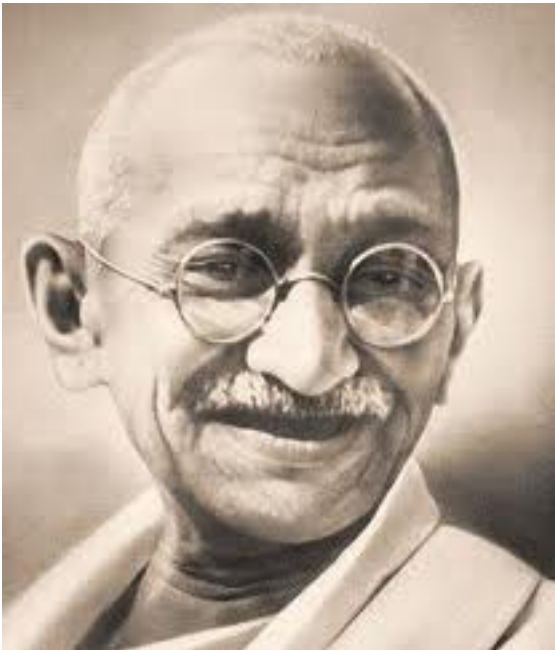
Let me know if you are interested in...

Some causes I am involved with:

- [Stanford Says No to War](#) (SSNW)
- [Students Confronting Apartheid by Israel](#) (SCAI)
- [Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics at Stanford](#) (AHA)

Thanks for listening! Questions? Comments?

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." -- Howard Thurman



"Be the change you want to see in the world" -- Mahatma Gandhi