



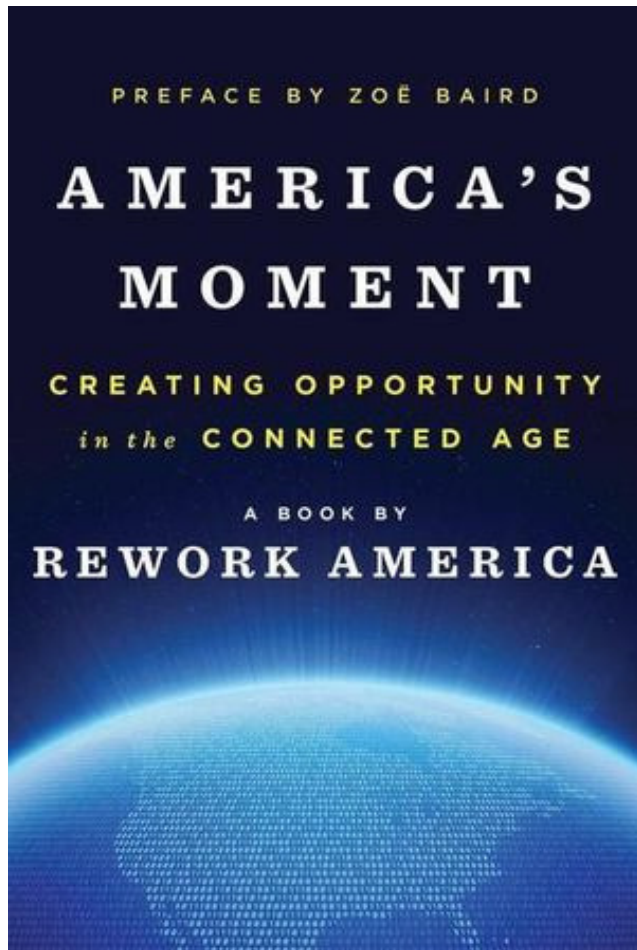
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'America's Moment' a positive message

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"America's Moment: Creating Opportunity in the Connected Age," by Rework America. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 2015. 331 pages, \$26.95.



“How can there be so many paths to opportunity with so few people traveling them?” Zoë Baird asks in the preface to “America’s Moment: Creating Opportunity in the Connected Age,” a roadmap for navigating our shared future by Rework America. “As a nation, our leaders and all of us need to recognize the profound transition we face. We have to focus on what we must do to help Americans succeed now, and what we must do to prepare our country for what comes next.”

Rework America is a group of 56 business and religious leaders, educators, bankers, public officials and other professionals who share a passion for policies aimed at preserving the United States’ preeminent role in world affairs. The group is led by Baird, president and CEO of the Markle Foundation, which was founded by John and Mary R. Markle in 1927 “to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge among people of the United States, and to promote the general good of mankind.”

An interesting feature of the book is that it is offered as a “collective point of view.” As such, none of the chapters have explicitly identified contributors. I found this feature both intriguing and somewhat frustrating as I am used to directing my accolades – as well as my criticisms – toward specific authors. It is difficult to determine precisely whom I am agreeing or disagreeing with on any given perspective.

Regardless of the reader’s inability to hold individuals accountable for the various assertions and recommendations detailed in “America’s Moment,” it was evident from the very first page the book is extensively researched, with 50 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the nine chapters that comprise the main text. The volume is a virtual treasure trove of information outlining our ever-evolving status with respect to a wide variety of key indicators, together with the implications of those data for our future course of action.

Conceptually, the ideas set forth in this well-intentioned and thoughtful treatise are served up in three major sections that flow logically. Each chapter builds upon the ideas and arguments outlined previously in the narrative. The initial two chapters form the backdrop and provide a

rationale for the segments that follow, which include four chapters on “More Opportunities for Good Work” and three chapters on “More Valued Career Paths.” The more I delved into the ideas being conveyed, the more this organizational structure made sense.

An attribute of the book I did find moderately reassuring was the inclusion of an “Actions Needed” section at the conclusion of each chapter. In similar efforts, it is not unusual for the authors to spend much more time describing the extent of the problem than actually recommending viable solutions. This is certainly not the case with the present book and serves to distinguish it from many of its contemporaries.

A lot of writers attempt to lay out a plan for shaping the future; very few make such a compelling case for their prescribed course of action. For instance, one of the chapters I was especially interested in was “Prepare for the Life You Want,” the next-to-last installment in “America’s Moment.” The authors begin by arguing persuasively how online educational programs are significantly and successfully shifting responsibility for learning from the institution to the student: “Our current structures mainly assume the traditional setting of a residential high school or college. Many forms of advanced education in business and the professions are already innovating well beyond this. As we argued earlier in this chapter, we do not believe that digital education – alone – is a cure-all. What it does do, however, is enable educators to consider more flexible models, with more on-ramps at many points in life.”

They conclude with six concrete suggestions for helping both the educator and the student take full advantage of the potential inherent in the innovations just described. These proposals include maximizing the flexibility of all education, developing hybrid curricula that combine online with face-to-face instruction in a balanced format, adjusting financial aid systems so they are more portable and tailored to individual student needs, expanding definitions of who is qualified to teach to include more emphasis on experience and hands-on expertise, and redesigning and re-emphasizing mentoring programs to better serve the needs of at-risk and under-served student populations.

Basically, “America’s Moment” sets out to demonstrate how the rise of advanced communication technologies has fundamentally altered the essential nature of work, what it means to be successful, and how our lives have been impacted by the phenomenal transformation still taking place. A core tenet of the book revolves around how the deep-rooted social architecture that has defined our culture and way of life for the past century is dissolving and being replaced by a new design few seem to appreciate or even fully comprehend.

“Americans in an earlier age remade their country to cope with the industrial revolution,” Baird explains. “Americans in this one can rework America for the digital revolution. The powerful forces of technology and globalization need not pose a threat. They can offer an historic opportunity. Imagine the America you want to live in: with good meaningful jobs and ways to prepare for them, opportunities to build businesses, the excitement and not fear of innovation, a chance to create a better life for oneself. This is the America you want your children to inherit.”

I could not agree more – with either the premise or the plan for achieving these lofty goals. In an age of daunting pessimism, Rework America offers an unabashedly positive view of how things can be. In an era best characterized by intense polarization on all fronts, Rework America reminds us of what made us such a great nation in the first place and how we can recapture the optimism we seem to have lost over the past few decades. I recommend “America’s Moment” highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.