

amity shlaes the forgotten man

amity shlaes the forgotten man is a significant work that delves into the complex economic and political history of the United States during the Great Depression era. This book offers a fresh perspective on the New Deal and its impact on American society, challenging conventional narratives that have long dominated historical discourse. Amity Shlaes presents the story of the "forgotten man," a concept originally coined by Franklin D. Roosevelt, but reinterpreted here to highlight the struggles of ordinary Americans affected by government policies. The narrative examines the consequences of interventionist policies, the role of government, and the economic realities faced by citizens during one of the most turbulent periods in American history. This article explores the key themes, historical context, and critical reception of Amity Shlaes' work, providing an in-depth understanding of its contribution to economic history and political debate. The following sections will guide readers through the background of the book, its central arguments, and its lasting influence on discussions about economic policy and history.

- Background and Context of Amity Shlaes The Forgotten Man
- Key Themes and Arguments in The Forgotten Man
- Historical Analysis and Interpretation
- Critical Reception and Impact
- Legacy and Relevance in Contemporary Discussions

Background and Context of Amity Shlaes The Forgotten Man

Amity Shlaes' book, *The Forgotten Man*, was published as a critical reassessment of the New Deal era, focusing on the years of the Great Depression in the United States. The title refers to a phrase popularized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1932 speech, where the "forgotten man" was described as the average American citizen who bore the economic burden of the crisis. Shlaes revisits this notion, emphasizing how New Deal policies, while aiming to provide relief, ultimately imposed significant costs on entrepreneurs, taxpayers, and workers. The book situates itself within a broader historiographical debate that contrasts interventionist approaches with free-market principles. By examining economic data, political decisions, and personal stories, Shlaes constructs a narrative that challenges the traditional glorification of the New Deal and presents a more nuanced view of its consequences.

The Author's Background

Amity Shlaes is a respected economic historian and journalist with a focus on 20th-century American economic history. Her expertise and previous works have established her as a critical voice in debates about government policy and

economic development. Her research methodology combines detailed archival study with economic analysis, lending credibility and depth to her interpretations of the Great Depression era.

Historical Setting

The Great Depression was a period marked by unprecedented economic collapse, widespread unemployment, and social distress. The federal government, under Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, introduced a series of reforms and programs collectively known as the New Deal. These policies aimed to stimulate recovery, provide relief to the unemployed, and reform financial systems. Shlaes' work challenges the effectiveness of these interventions by exploring their unintended economic consequences and the burdens placed on the "forgotten man" - the average American taxpayer and small business owner.

Key Themes and Arguments in *The Forgotten Man*

The central themes of Amity Shlaes' *The Forgotten Man* revolve around economic freedom, government intervention, and the costs of policy decisions. The book argues that many New Deal programs, though well-intentioned, hindered economic recovery and prolonged the Depression by discouraging investment and entrepreneurship. Shlaes contends that the "forgotten man" was not just the unemployed but also those who funded and sustained the economy under increasingly restrictive policies.

Government Intervention and Economic Consequences

One of the critical arguments in the book is that government intervention during the 1930s distorted market mechanisms. Policies such as high taxes, increased regulation, and labor restrictions created an environment where economic growth was stifled. Shlaes highlights how these measures affected business confidence, employment opportunities, and capital formation, thereby delaying economic recovery.

The Concept of the "Forgotten Man"

Shlaes revisits the original meaning of the "forgotten man," emphasizing the overlooked perspective of those who financed government programs through taxation. This reinterpretation shifts the narrative from solely focusing on recipients of aid to including the broader economic actors whose contributions were essential to national prosperity. The book stresses the importance of acknowledging these individuals when evaluating the success and failures of New Deal policies.

Economic Data and Personal Narratives

By combining statistical analysis with personal stories, Shlaes provides a comprehensive picture of the era. This approach humanizes the economic debate and illustrates the real-world impact of policies on various segments of the population. The use of economic data supports her thesis that the New Deal's approach was counterproductive in fostering sustainable growth.

Historical Analysis and Interpretation

Amity Shlaes employs a revisionist historical lens to analyze the Great Depression and the New Deal. Her interpretation challenges the traditional positive assessments of Roosevelt's policies by emphasizing their limitations and negative repercussions. This section explores how her methodology and findings contribute to a broader understanding of this critical period in American history.

Comparison with Traditional Historiography

Traditional historiography often portrays the New Deal as a heroic effort that saved the country from economic ruin. In contrast, Shlaes critiques this optimistic view by highlighting the economic distortions and inefficiencies that arose. She argues that many historians have overlooked the costs borne by taxpayers and entrepreneurs, focusing instead on the immediate relief provided to certain groups.

Use of Primary Sources and Economic Evidence

Shlaes' work is distinguished by its extensive use of primary sources, including government records, contemporary accounts, and economic statistics. This evidence-based approach allows her to reconstruct the economic environment of the 1930s with precision and to question long-held assumptions about the New Deal's effectiveness.

Impact on Economic Thought

The book has influenced discussions in economic history by encouraging a reevaluation of government intervention during economic crises. Shlaes' arguments support a more cautious approach to state involvement in markets, advocating for policies that encourage entrepreneurship and economic freedom rather than heavy regulation and taxation.

Critical Reception and Impact

Upon its release, Amity Shlaes' *The Forgotten Man* sparked considerable debate among historians, economists, and political commentators. The book was praised for its rigorous research and engaging narrative but also faced criticism from those who defended the New Deal's legacy. This section examines the spectrum of responses and the book's role in shaping contemporary discourse.

Positive Reviews

Supporters of Shlaes' work commend her for presenting a compelling alternative viewpoint that challenges conventional wisdom. Many appreciated the detailed economic analysis and the focus on the often-neglected perspective of taxpayers and entrepreneurs. The book has been acknowledged for contributing to a more balanced understanding of the 1930s economic policies.

Criticism and Controversy

Critics argue that Shlaes downplays the social and humanitarian benefits of the New Deal, focusing too heavily on economic metrics. Some historians contend that the book overlooks the complexities of the era and the necessity of government action in the face of unprecedented economic collapse. The debate highlights the ongoing tension between differing interpretations of economic history.

Influence on Policy Debates

The *Forgotten Man* has been cited in discussions about the role of government in economic recovery, particularly during recessions and financial crises. Its emphasis on the unintended consequences of interventionist policies informs arguments for reducing regulation and promoting free-market solutions. The book continues to serve as a reference point in policy debates and academic analyses.

Legacy and Relevance in Contemporary Discussions

Amity Shlaes' *The Forgotten Man* remains a significant contribution to the study of the Great Depression and economic policy. Its legacy is evident in ongoing discussions about government intervention, fiscal responsibility, and economic freedom. The themes explored in the book resonate with contemporary challenges in managing economic crises and designing effective policy responses.

Lessons for Modern Economic Policy

The analysis of the New Deal's impacts provides valuable insights into the potential risks of expansive government intervention. Policymakers today can learn from the historical consequences highlighted by Shlaes, balancing the need for relief with the importance of maintaining incentives for growth and innovation.

Continued Relevance of the "Forgotten Man"

The concept of the "forgotten man" has evolved to symbolize the often-overlooked contributors to economic systems. Shlaes' reinterpretation encourages a broader consideration of all stakeholders affected by policy decisions, ensuring that economic strategies do not neglect the foundational actors in society.

Educational and Scholarly Use

The book is widely used in academic settings to provoke critical thinking about economic history and public policy. Its comprehensive research and engaging narrative style make it a valuable resource for students and scholars seeking to understand the complexities of the Great Depression and governmental responses.

- Reevaluation of New Deal policies
- Emphasis on economic freedom and entrepreneurship
- Insight into the costs of government intervention
- Influence on contemporary economic debates
- Educational significance in economic history

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of Amity Shlaes' book 'The Forgotten Man'?

'The Forgotten Man' explores the impact of the New Deal policies on ordinary Americans during the Great Depression, arguing that government intervention often hindered economic recovery and individual initiative.

Who is the 'Forgotten Man' according to Amity Shlaes in her book?

In Shlaes' book, the 'Forgotten Man' refers to the average American citizen who bears the economic burden of government programs and policies, often overlooked in political debates.

How does Amity Shlaes critique the New Deal in 'The Forgotten Man'?

Shlaes critiques the New Deal by asserting that many of its programs prolonged the Great Depression, increased government control, and discouraged private enterprise.

What evidence does Amity Shlaes use to support her arguments in 'The Forgotten Man'?

Shlaes uses historical data, economic analysis, and contemporary accounts to argue that New Deal policies were often counterproductive and economically damaging.

How has 'The Forgotten Man' influenced contemporary views on government intervention?

'The Forgotten Man' has contributed to debates on the role of government in the economy, encouraging skepticism about large-scale intervention and promoting free-market principles.

What are some criticisms of Amity Shlaes' interpretation in 'The Forgotten Man'?

Critics argue that Shlaes downplays the positive effects of the New Deal, overlooks the complexity of the era, and underestimates the necessity of government aid during the Depression.

Is 'The Forgotten Man' by Amity Shlaes considered a revisionist history?

Yes, 'The Forgotten Man' is often regarded as revisionist history because it challenges the traditional positive narrative of the New Deal and presents a critical perspective on FDR's policies.

Additional Resources

1. *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* by Amity Shlaes
This book reexamines the Great Depression from a fresh perspective, focusing on the role of government policies and their impact on the economy. Shlaes challenges the traditional narrative that blames the economic crisis solely on market failures, arguing instead that interventionist policies prolonged the downturn. It provides a detailed analysis of the 1930s, emphasizing the experiences of everyday Americans often overlooked in mainstream histories.

2. *Coolidge* by Amity Shlaes

A biography of President Calvin Coolidge, this book explores the life and presidency of the 30th U.S. president, known for his laissez-faire approach to government and economic policy during the 1920s. Shlaes highlights Coolidge's commitment to limited government and fiscal conservatism, presenting him as a model of good governance. The book provides context for understanding the economic environment preceding the Great Depression.

3. *Liberty and Prosperity: The Economic Lessons of the 1920s* by Burton W. Folsom Jr.

Folsom examines the dynamic economic growth of the 1920s, focusing on entrepreneurship, innovation, and minimal government interference. The book contrasts this period of prosperity with the subsequent Great Depression, offering insights into the causes and consequences of economic policies. It complements Shlaes' work by providing a broader economic backdrop.

4. *The Great Depression: An Economic Legacy* by Robert S. McElvaine

This comprehensive study delves into the causes, events, and aftermath of the Great Depression, analyzing both economic factors and political responses. McElvaine discusses the social impact of the crisis and the effectiveness of New Deal programs. The book offers a balanced perspective, useful for readers seeking to compare different interpretations of the era.

5. *New Deal or Raw Deal? How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America* by Burton W. Folsom Jr.

Folsom critiques the New Deal policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt, arguing that many programs hindered economic recovery and extended the Depression. The book challenges the popular view of the New Deal as a fully positive response and explores unintended consequences. It serves as a counterpoint to more favorable assessments of the period.

6. *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* by

David M. Kennedy

Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning work covers the Great Depression and World War II, emphasizing the resilience and struggles of the American people. The book places economic events within a broader social and political context, offering a detailed narrative that complements Shlaes' economic focus. It provides a wide-ranging overview of the era's challenges and transformations.

7. *The Roosevelt Myth* by John T. Flynn

Originally published in 1948, this critical examination of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency questions the effectiveness of his policies in ending the Great Depression. Flynn argues that Roosevelt's New Deal expanded government power without delivering decisive economic recovery. The book is a classic conservative critique that aligns with some of Shlaes' viewpoints.

8. *America's Great Depression* by Murray N. Rothbard

Rothbard presents an Austrian School perspective on the Great Depression, emphasizing the role of government intervention and monetary policy errors. The book critiques the Federal Reserve and New Deal programs, advocating for free-market solutions. It provides an alternative economic analysis that complements the themes explored in Shlaes' work.

9. *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* by Steve Fraser

Fraser examines the political and social transformations in America during the early 20th century, including the Great Depression and New Deal era. The book explores how public attitudes toward government and economic power shifted, influencing policy and culture. It offers a broader sociopolitical context for understanding the environment in which Shlaes' *Forgotten Man* takes place.

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