



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

## Yes You Can

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President and C.E.O.

California historian and former state librarian Kevin Starr recently published the latest in his wonderful multi-volume history of our state. In addition to providing rich detail

about the 1950s and early 1960s, *Golden Dreams* documents a fundamentally important period in our state's development.

This was the era in which the first California state water plan was crafted and adopted, turning water use from a sometimes deadly free-for-all competition into an orderly process that allocated water for agricultural, residential, commercial and recreational users. The state's highway system was also designed and constructed during this period. It was the time when a commission led by Occidental College President Arthur Coons drafted, and the state legislature adopted, our Master Plan for Higher Education, creating the system of state universities, colleges and community colleges that guarantees any qualified California student access to higher education.

Leaders from the private sector and education were engaged in the design of these systems. A legislature with a majority of centrist Republicans and Democrats cooperated to pass the needed laws.

Through intense work and collaboration, these major social systems and physical infrastructure were put in place. They then supported the development of business, science and industry, and with them the enormous growth in the California economy and quality of life that we enjoyed for the next four decades.

Last November, Dr. Starr and I had a conversation about the future of California, at a dinner for some of the Club's long-time members. We discussed California's current problems against the backdrop of this history of the 1950s and early 1960s.

The group agreed that California is in a difficult situation today. The decline in the state's tax base has severely impacted public higher education, with access to college receding for many of the state's students. Without continued investment, the state's infrastructure is fraying. Our fiscal and budget situation is out of whack, with dramatic ups and downs in the state budget caused by the swings in tax revenues based on fat and lean economic cycles.

For decades, the state prospered from the political, social and organizational capital put in place in the 1950s and early 60s. In fact, the work our predecessors did during these years was so good that the vast majority of the state's citizens and potential leaders could

afford not to pay attention to how things were working in our state, and most of us didn't have to bother ourselves with being personally involved in politics, government or community leadership. Everything seemed to work well enough without our attention.

But as brilliant as they were for their time, these structures are now out of date and are not working any longer. There is nothing new in place that remotely resembles the insightful plans that governors Goodwin Knight and Pat Brown, moderate legislators and private sector leaders created in the 1950s and early '60s. The lack of smart new strategies will undermine the state's prosperity in the future, making us less competitive in the U.S. and global economies.

What to do? Many people, including Dr. Starr, see the increasing polarization of California state politics as one of the fundamental problems that prevents us from getting things done. The state's current primary system and other factors encourage the election of extreme candidates from both parties, and then when they take office, they find it hard to agree on what needs to be done.

We clearly need some creative new work to reconstruct the platform for California's prosperity. It might consist of rethinking the economic base for public higher education in the state, figuring out how to green the state's economy for both economic savings and growth, redesigning our energy economy, developing smart highways and transportation systems, supporting the biotech industry.

But to implement any such strategies, we need to eliminate the ultra-partisanship in the state that so often paralyzes us from moving forward, including preventing the state from even passing a sensible budget. One proposal – taking redistricting out of the hands of the legislature and putting it into the hands of an independent commission – was passed by the voters on the November 2008 ballot and is currently being put into practice. This should make state legislative races more competitive and those elected less extreme.

At our November dinner, one long-time member agreed about all these problems, and said, "But what can I do about it? I can't run for office..."

We need to produce new strategies for a strong economy and prosperous society in our state, and get people elected who will make them happen. No one, including current elected officials, are going to take care of this for us. So, my answer to the question above is "Yes you can." For example, I believe that new, independent redistricting commission is looking for applicants right now: [www.wedrawthelines.ca.gov](http://www.wedrawthelines.ca.gov) Ω