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No Wonder People Feel Disfranchised **by Sheldon Richman**

In a recent poll of cable-television viewers, only 20 percent said the general public has much say in what the government does. Maybe people are finally catching on. It's about time.

The poll by Peter D. Hart can't be pleasing to those who make a holy shrine of the ballot box. "Our key finding was that people are really unhappy about their role, or lack of it, in the democratic process," Hart told the *Washington Post*.

Recent events could hardly be expected to build confidence. It may be starting to dawn on people that government has been largely inept at what they would regard as its most important task: keeping them safe from foreign attack. The revelations after 9/11 demonstrate what some people have long known: government is like the Wizard of Oz. Behind the imposing façade are a bunch of clueless bureaucrats and politicians who are more interested in extending their tenures in office than anything else.

This is a bipartisan phenomenon. The current debate over who was more incompetent, the Clintonites or the Bushies, is just a distraction. When it comes to the fraud known as "national security," it's strictly a one-party system. (It's really not that much different in domestic affairs.)

Bill Kristol, editor of neoconservative magazine *The Weekly Standard* and a leading advocate of replacing the old American republic with an empire, gave the game away the other day. On Fox News's *Special Report with Brit Hume*, Kristol had harsh words for former Clinton and Bush anti-terrorism specialist Richard Clarke, whose new book indicts the Bush administration for not taking al-Qaeda seriously enough before 9/11. Kristol criticized Clarke for breaking a tacit agreement between Democrats and Republicans. What was the agreement? Not to score political points by pointing out each other's failings in guarding the American people against terrorism.

Close observers wouldn't have been surprised by Kristol's point. But I wonder what the average American would think about this agreement. Perhaps "conspiracy" is a more precise word for what Kristol was talking about.

Several hundreds of billions of dollars are extracted from the earnings of the American people every year, ostensibly to keep them safe. But they were not kept safe, beginning with the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Then they were lied to — by Democrats and Republicans. After 9/11 administration officials, such as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, said they never dreamed anyone would hijack airplanes and crash them into buildings. But we know there were intelligence warnings about just this tactic before the attacks. Why do they lie to us, except to save their own skins?

Then there are those phantom weapons of mass destruction. Need anything more be said? Since U.S. forces took over Iraq, the administration has been spreading money around like melted butter. No scientist or other informed person in that country could fail to realize that providing evidence of such weapons would bring a small fortune. That's a sure sign that there is no evidence. It also refutes any administration official, such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who insists that weapons might still be found.

Given all this, why shouldn't people believe that the government is something separate from them and out of their control?

In the presidential season one might expect people to feel that this is their chance to make a difference — until one looks at the “choice” facing them. Who is set to oppose the incumbent who ignored warnings about terrorism and then misled the American people into war against a country that had nothing to do with that terrorism? John Kerry, a senator who voted to give President Bush a blank check to go to war (in violation of the Constitution); who voted to give Attorney John Ashcroft astoundingly un-American powers to curtail civil liberties (including habeas corpus); and who now says his votes don't mean what they clearly do mean. Or as Groucho Marx said once, “Who are you going to believe, me or your eyes?”

Two hundred and eighty-five million people cannot rule a country. But a small clique can rule and say it's on behalf of the people. The last few years have been a valuable civics lesson.

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