



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Attention Democracy Deficit

by James Bovard

The following is the introduction to James Bovard's new book, [Attention Deficit Democracy](#).

The forms of our free government have outlasted the ends for which they were instituted, and have become a mere mockery of the people for whose benefit they should operate.

— "Americus" [1775]

Delusions about democracy are subverting peace and freedom. The American system of government is collapsing thanks to ignorant citizens, lying politicians, and a government leashed neither by law nor Constitution. While presidents and pundits harp on democracy's inevitable spread around the world, it is perishing at home.

Victorious politicians routinely invoke the "will of the people" to sanctify their power. But voters cannot countenance what they do not understand. The "will of the people" is often simply a measure of how many people fell for which lies, how many people were frightened by which advertisements, and which red herrings worked on which target audiences. Rather than the "will of the people," election results are often only a one-day snapshot of transient mass delusions.

Many Americans have little or no idea how government works or who is holding the reins on their lives. The majority of American voters do not know the name of their congressman, the length of terms of House or Senate members, what the Bill of Rights guarantees, or what the government is actually doing in the vast majority of its interventions. A survey after the 2002 congressional election revealed that less than a third of Americans knew "that the Republicans controlled the House of Representatives prior to the election." Recent polls show that almost two-thirds of Americans could not name a single Supreme Court justice and that 58 percent of Americans could not name a single cabinet department in the federal government.

Americans are assured that they are free because rulers take power only with the people's informed consent. What does "informed consent" mean these days? It means knowing the names

of the president's pets but not knowing his record on key issues. It means knowing the sexual orientation of family members of candidates for high office, but falling prey to their rewriting of history. It means recalling the phrases the government endlessly repeats, and screening out evidence of government atrocities.

The political ignorance of scores of millions of Americans prevents them from recognizing the consequences or dangers of government actions. The citizenry is increasingly on automatic pilot, paying less attention to each new war, each new power grab, each new dubious presidential assertion.

The rising gullibility of the American people may be the most important trend in U.S. democracy. With each passing decade, with each new presidency, it takes less and less to snooker Americans. And a candidate only has to fool enough people on one day to snare power over everyone for four years.

Attention Deficit Democracy begets a government that is nominally democratic – in which elections are boisterous events accompanied by torrents of deceptive ads and mass rallies. But after the election, the president returns to his pedestal. Attention Deficit Democracy lacks the most important check on the abuse of power: an informed citizenry resolutely defending their rights and liberties.

In 1693, William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, wrote what could be the motto for modern American government. "Let the people think they govern, and they will be governed." Rulers endlessly assure people that they are in charge – while creating agency after agency, program after program that people can neither comprehend nor control. Americans' political thinking is becoming akin to the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance – a series of bromides that sink into the mind and stifle independent, critical thought.

Monarchial Myths of Democracy

President George W. Bush calls democracy "the most honorable form of government ever devised by man." Americans are taught that the sum of American democracy is vastly greater than its parts. Regardless of how often the candidate withholds information or how many false claims he emits, no matter how deluded the average voter, and no matter what manipulations occur before and during voting – election results are sacrosanct.

The same types of myths have grown up around democracy that long propped up monarchs. In the 1500s, peasants were encouraged to believe that the king was chosen by God to serve His purposes on Earth. Today, Americans are encouraged to believe that Bush's reelection victory is a sign of God's approval of Bush's reign. In the 1600s, English yeomen were told that any limit on the King's power was an affront to God. Today, Americans are told that any restraint on the president's power thwarts the Will of the People. In the 1700s, the downtrodden of Europe were told that their king possessed the sum of all Earthly wisdom. Today, people are encouraged

to believe that the president and his top cadre practically know all and see all – their insider information transcends the petty facts unearthed by the CIA, congressional committees, or the 9/11 Commission. In the early 1800s, people were encouraged to believe that their kings automatically cared about their subjects, simply because that was the nature of kings. Now, people are taught that the government automatically serves the people, simply because a plurality of voters assented to one of the politicians the major parties offered them.

As people became more literate and better informed, they lost their faith in monarchs. But new delusions have replaced old superstitions. Democracy multiplies the number of people with a vested interest in delusions about government. Americans are supposed to sit back, confident that voting cures all political evils – as if the process for selecting rulers vaccinated the political system from harm. People are told that as long as they can cast a ballot, they will be safe. In a democracy, people are led to believe that they can easily apply the brakes to government, no matter how unstoppable it becomes.

Fabricating a Right to Rule

It is a common saying among political campaign consultants: "In victory, all sins are forgotten." Unfortunately, the sooner citizens forget the lies of the campaign trail, the sooner they will be victimized by new government failures and sacrificed in more unnecessary wars.

Losing a certain percentage of the voters who understand issues or recall facts is now simply a "transaction cost" for a political campaign. The only lies that are unforgivable nowadays are those that repel more voters than they con. And regardless of how brazen a politician's howlers, the media rushes to repaint him as worthy of respect and deference.

The biggest election frauds usually occur before the voting booths open. Bush is upholding a long tradition of presidential deceit. He was reelected in large part due to mass delusions about Iraq. An August 2004 poll found that "among those who wrongly believe that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction, 81% think going to war was the right decision. Among those who correctly know that Iraq had no WMD, just 8% think the war was right." Bush and Cheney successfully inoculated tens of millions of voters against reality, linking Saddam to Al Qaeda and 9/11 and portraying the invasion of Iraq as a necessary part of the war on terrorism. A University of Maryland October 2004 poll analysis concluded, "It is clear that supporters of the president are more likely to have misperceptions than those who oppose him."

For many voters in 2004, Bush's presumed personal goodness was all that they needed to know. When Bush acted like he was incorrigible, many voters hailed his conduct as proof he was steadfast. When Bush refused to admit any mistakes, many voters assumed his record was impeccable. The more Bush boasted of his consistency, the less attention many Americans paid to reality. Bush "almost never entertains public doubt, which is part of the White House design to build a more powerful presidency," the Washington Post reported. To breed blind faith in the

ruler, people are encouraged to see the president as infallible. When Bush stumbled in the presidential debates, many supporters felt a bond with him as someone also not weighed down by excessive intellectual baggage. Floridian Lynn Farr, a 43-year-old former restaurant owner, explained his vote for Bush: "The guy wears a cowboy hat. He cuts brush. You always see [news] clips of him driving a big ol' Ford truck and working on his ranch. He's one of us."

Bush has proven that a president can get away with far more hokum than previously thought. Unfortunately, this was also the lesson of the Clinton presidency. Even though Americans often recognized that Bill Clinton lied, many still believed him when he promised to "feel their pain." Clinton's case for bombing Serbia in 1999 was as dubious as Bush's case for invading Iraq. But for both Clinton and Bush, their self-proclaimed good intentions made unjustified U.S. killings irrelevant.

"Presidents have lied so much to us about foreign policy that they've established almost a common-law right to do so," history professor Leo Ribuffo observed in 1998. From John F. Kennedy lying about the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba; to Johnson lying about the Gulf of Tonkin resolution; to Richard Nixon lying about the secret bombing of Cambodia; to Jimmy Carter lying about the Shah of Iran being a progressive, enlightened ruler; to Ronald Reagan lying about terrorism and Iran-Contra; to George H. W. Bush lying about the justifications for the first Gulf War, entire generations have come of age since the ancient time when a president's power was constrained by a duty of candor to the public.

Unfortunately, many citizens' minds are sponges, soaking up whatever government emits. Lies almost always turn out to be duds, as far as detonating any backlash against political abuses. Self-government is vanishing because of black holes in citizens' heads where connections are not made and sparks do not fly.

Ironically, despite the government's long record of deceits, distrust of government is more dangerous than government power itself – at least according to the conventional wisdom of today's Establishment. Private doubts are supposedly a greater threat to America than official lies. Trust in government becomes mass Prozac, keeping people docile and compliant.

Battered Citizen Syndrome

The government is exploiting public dread to redefine the relation between rulers and the American people. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, in a talk to Republican National Convention delegates in September 2004, praised Bush's role as the protector of the nation and assured them that "this president sees America as we think about a 10-year-old child. I know as a parent I would sacrifice all for my children." Card's comment generated almost no controversy. Yet viewing Americans as young children needing protection makes a mockery of democracy. Is servility now the price of survival?

The more ignorant the populace, the easier it becomes for rulers to frighten people into submission. Bush was reelected in part because his administration, policies, and statements, helped by many dubious alerts and warnings, boosted the number of Americans who feared a terrorist attack during 2004. Each time the feds issued a new warning of a terrorist threat after 9/11, the president's approval rating rose by an average of almost 3 percent.

As long as enough people can be frightened, then all people can be ruled. Politicians cow people on election day to corral them afterward. The more that fear is the key issue, the more that voters will be seeking a savior, not a representative – and the more the winner can claim all the power he claims to need.

We now have the Battered Citizen Syndrome: the more debacles, the more voters cling to faith in their rulers. Like a train engineer bonding with the survivors of a train wreck that happened on his watch, Bush constantly reminded Americans of 9/11 and his wars. The greater the government's failure to protect, the greater the subsequent mass fear – and the easier it becomes to subjugate the populace. The continuing follies and flounders of the war on terrorism were irrelevant compared to the paramount promise of protection. The craving for a protector drops an Iron Curtain around the mind, preventing a person from accepting evidence that would shred his political security blanket.

In recent years, Americans have devoted far more effort to spreading democracy than to understanding it. Bush, echoing Clinton and earlier presidents, says that America is "called" to spread democracy and freedom around the world. Forgetting the warnings by early presidents about the dangers of foreign entanglements, the U.S. government is charging forward to remake the world in its own image.

Americans have been taught to view U.S. intervention abroad as the equivalent of a holy man touching a sick person, instantly healing whatever ails them. Even if the person isn't sick, getting a holy nudge can't but help them. "Fixing" elections is doing a service to foreign peoples since the U.S. government knows what is best for them. And if foreigners object to U.S. interference, that just proves that they are deluded and must be protected from themselves.

In his second inaugural address, Bush issued a revolutionary challenge to every government in the world: "We will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right." Bush is correct that freedom is "eternally right." But that does not confer upon Bush or other U.S. presidents the right to act like the World Pope of Democracy, entitled to appoint rulers in each nation upon Earth. The notion of American uniqueness has gone from a point of pride to a pretext for aggression.

Elective Dictatorship

President George Washington declared in 1790 that "the virtues and knowledge of the people would effectually oppose the introduction of tyranny." But today's Americans do little to justify the confidence of the nation's first president. The federal government has been rapidly adding new coercive penalties to its statutory arsenal for decades. Americans have acquiesced to politicians and bureaucrats taking over one area of their lives after another.

President Washington may have also been confident that his fellow citizens and their offspring would not forget his warning that "Government is not reason, it is not eloquence – it is force." Unfortunately, as long as recent American presidents continue to praise freedom, they are usually permitted to seize as much power as they please. On November 13, 2001, Bush announced that he had the right to nullify all rights. Bush decreed that he had the power to label as an "enemy combatant" anyone suspected of involvement with terrorism. The president need provide no evidence for such designations; there would be no access to courts to challenge such a label; and people could be detained forever on the president's accusation. And "enemy combatants" need not be combatants. Bush administration lawyers have made clear that even hapless donors to foreign charities can be seized and held without charges if their contribution ends up in the wrong hands. In July 2005, Bush's solicitor general announced in federal court that the entire United States is a "battlefield" upon which Bush has absolute power to have people – including American citizens – seized and detained indefinitely.

In 2002, Bush's top legal advisors informed him that, as commander-in-chief during wartime, he was above all the laws Congress enacted. Bush's legal whiz kids also redefined torture so that CIA agents and U.S. soldiers could brutalize detainees without fear of prosecution. Americans were assured that the Abu Ghraib photos that leaked out in 2004 were the result of "a few bad apples." However, details later emerged that CIA operatives or U.S. soldiers had killed dozens of detainees during interrogations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Reviving a hallowed tradition from the Middle Ages, the administration announced that it could use "evidence" gained from torture to prosecute detainees in its military tribunals. Americans' scant response to the torture scandal signaled their growing tolerance for absolute power – as long as the president promised it would be used to make them secure.

This is the age of **Leviathan Democracy**. Leviathan was the Biblical term that English philosopher Thomas Hobbes used in 1651 to describe a government absolute and far superior to its subjects, whose task was to obey and, when ordered, die. The United States was an anti-Leviathan at its founding – the first government to be created with strict limitations on its power enshrined into the Constitution to protect citizens from their rulers in perpetuity.

But in recent decades, government power has become unbounded. The U.S. government still has the formal trappings of a democracy – candidates, elections, congressional proceedings, judges draped in long black robes. But we have fallen far from the Founding Fathers' ideal of a

Rule of Law. Today, when the president's desires extend beyond legal boundaries, the Constitution and the statute book be damned.

Attention Deficit Democracy begets Leviathan because rulers exploit people's ignorance to seize more power over them. The bigger government becomes, the fewer citizens understand it, the less representative it will tend to be. The contract between rulers and ruled is replaced by a blank check. As long as presidents and their appointees recite the proper phrases and strike the correct poses, they can do as they please.

Democracy unleashes the State in the name of the people. Yet citizens are assured that their government will protect liberty, no matter what. Democracy automatically reins itself in so that it does not gorge on power like a horse eating too many oats, stopping only when it explodes.

Government is an elective dictatorship when voters do little more than select who will violate the laws and Constitution. Bush, like other U.S. presidents, perpetually equates democracy with freedom. But if the purported consent of voters confers upon the winner the right to nullify citizens' rights – they are voting for a master, not a representative. Elections become little more than reverse slave auctions, in which slaves choose their masters.

Voting is now a way of conferring power and honors on politicians, rather than a method of reining in rulers. In the early American Republic, candidates would stress their fidelity to the Constitution. But the Constitution has vanished from the campaign trail, replaced by competing promises of new handouts and new protections against the vicissitudes of daily life.

The Founding Fathers did not design a "Great Leader" democracy. The ultimate principle of the American system of government is strict limits on the power of all branches of the federal government. Yet Bush, like earlier presidents, has swayed many people to view checks and balances as a peril to their personal survival.

Attention Deficit Democracy lulls citizens into thinking that they have nothing to fear from the rising number of sticks and shackles that politicians and bureaucrats can use on them. The peril of rising U.S. government power is stark to foreigners, who see U.S. aggression around the globe. It is stark to many people who hear the president talk of military killings as "bringing justice" to the deceased. It is stark to those who fear the United States may invade their country next. But it is not stark to too many Americans.

The Coming End of American Democracy?

The more authoritarian the U.S. government becomes, the louder presidents praise democracy. Unfortunately, democracy is a magical word that permits speakers to automatically fog the minds of many listeners.

By what standard could American democracy be considered a success? Simply because referendums on rulers occur without widespread violence? Because most Americans acquiesce to whomever the political system ordains as the winner? Because the majority of people continue

obeying, and paying taxes? Simply because there have not been Albanian-style mass violent attacks on government office buildings?

Bogus fears can produce real servitude. Politicians stampede people with one dubious terror attack warning after another; one constitutional right after another is decimated; one barrier against absolutism after another is breached.

Is our era coming to resemble medieval times, when people were so suffused with fear that they formally signed away their rights and pledged fealty to whoever promised to protect them? There is scant glory or dignity in panicky national referendums to choose a Shepherd-in-Chief.

Are Americans free simply because they are permitted a perfunctory choice on who will molest their rights and liberties? How much of a facade of democracy is necessary to placate the public? Is it the "will of the people" – or at least the majority – to be deluded? Does self-government now mean anything more than showing up once every few years to ratify one's rulers? Is the sole question remaining in American politics – how to find a good master for the American people?

It is naive to trust to the ignorant preferences of frightened people to preserve freedom. In America today, all leaders have to do is brazenly deny obvious facts and they become entitled to commit new abuses. Bush has demonstrated how easily tens of millions of people can be conned into contented subjugation and marching lockstep behind a president whose falsehoods have already left thousands of Americans dead and maimed. The more lies that a government gets away with, the more it will assume that it can get away with anything and everything.

People need defenses against democracies as well as tyrannies. The road to political ruin is paved with positive thinking. The issue is not whether democracy is good or evil, but that seeing democracy as an absolute good opens the gates to great evil. Because of Clinton's and Bush's invocations of democracy to consecrate their power and sanctify foreign aggression, it is vital to analyze democracy now.

At this point, the de facto American theory of government consists of trusting to the good intentions of those who hold nearly boundless power over us, trusting that they will not violate any laws that don't really need violating, that they won't bomb any foreign countries that don't really need bombing, and that they won't torture anyone who doesn't really need torturing. And if they do violate laws, bomb foreigners, and torture innocents – then it is all harmless errors and folks should just move along because there is nothing to see here.

This book examines the rising ignorance of the electorate, the fearmongering tactics of the 2004 and other presidential campaigns, the profusion of lying and how it fundamentally changes candidates' relation to citizens, the ways in which contemporary elections are degenerating into a tawdry trading of votes for handouts and subservience, and the current Messianic Democracy push. The ongoing torture scandal will be considered in depth as the arch-example of what happens when the government is permitted to grant itself absolute power, when "due process"

consists of nothing more than long-delayed coroners' inquests. We will briefly consider popular delusions on the inevitability of democracy and the inevitability of democracies keeping the peace. Finally, we will look at some reforms that can curb politicians' damage and recapture the blessings of representative government for ourselves and posterity.

It would be a mistake to view Bush as an aberration in modern political history. There are far more parallels between Bush and Clinton than either Democrats or Republicans would like to admit. And most of Clinton's abuses followed precedents set by Bush Sr., Nixon, Johnson, and earlier presidents. Bush is more a symptom of the decay of American democracy than a first cause.

To detail current failings is not to idealize the past. There was no Golden Age in America in which all politicians were honest, most citizens were politically savvy, and government strictly obeyed the Constitution. And yet, the deterioration on all fronts in recent years is a fundamental change, not simply a brief pause in the annals of national greatness.

A democratic government that respects no limits on its own power is a ticking time bomb, waiting to destroy the rights it was created to protect. The more people who believe democracy is failsafe, the more likely it will fail. Attention Deficit Democracy produces the attitudes, ignorance, and arrogance that pave the way to political collapse.

This book will deal with democracy as the term is currently understood. Democracy is commonly used to describe a political system that involves regular elections, opportunities for citizen involvement, and purported limits on government power. There are other definitions that are more philosophically pure or intellectually stout. However, it would be a waste to spend hundreds of pages condemning the current system solely for failing to measure up to one abstract definition. Instead, we will examine what democracy in the real world is becoming, using the statements and standards of earlier centuries to vivify how times are changing.

James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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