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Misguided Democracy **by George C. Leef**

[Attention Deficit Democracy](#) by James Bovard (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); 288 pages; \$26.95.

One of Winston Churchill's most famous quips is that democracy is the worst form of government — except for all the others. The supposition behind the “except” clause is that bad rulers can be peacefully removed in a democracy, whereas dictators, monarchs, and other kinds of rulers can't usually be removed without violence. What if, however, the state becomes so omnipotent that the elections under democracy are virtually meaningless? What if “throwing the rascals out” means only replacing them with other rascals? What if people come to so depend on governmental welfare handouts that they become indifferent to everything else the government does? Under those conditions, it might be the case that democracy is just a delusion — a fancy, elaborate ritual in which the results of elections scarcely matter.

In *Attention Deficit Democracy*, author James Bovard takes a hard and unflattering look at American democracy in the 21st century, and the picture that emerges is not at all the pretty, civics-book notion that democracy “works” because “the people govern themselves.” Bovard has made quite a writing career out of his desire to penetrate the fog of deception that shrouds so much of what government does these days to expose the truth that the state is becoming ever stronger and the sphere of liberty is constantly shrinking. (His earlier books include *Lost Rights*, *Freedom in Chains*, and *Feeling Your Pain*; they're all worth reading.) With this book, he asks unsettling questions about the future of a nation afflicted with “attention deficit democracy” and concludes that unless the United States experiences a dramatic shift in its political philosophy, our freedom will continue melting away.

The main difficulty Bovard points out is the fact that most Americans are woefully ill-informed and easily manipulated by political spin-doctors. He puts it this way: “It is naive to trust the ignorant preferences of frightened people to preserve freedom.”

“Ignorant preferences”? What sort of talk is that? Doesn't the author know that Americans are better educated than ever — according to the education establishment, that is? Bovard doesn't

buy it, correctly noting that Americans read less and less, and what information they do get is from a generally statist media. He dismisses the usual debate about liberal or conservative media bias with the observation that, whether liberal or conservative, most media figures can be counted on to support the interventionist assumptions behind federal policies, domestic and foreign. Therefore, what little information Americans have about politics reinforces the supposed need for a big and constantly meddling government. The people have been led to believe that the state is their friend and protector, and thus even the most egregious falsehoods and flagrant abuses of power fail to disturb them. As long as their government goodies keep coming, they'll support Leviathan.

Attention deficit democracy is aggravated by the fact that most political elections are noncompetitive, owing to careful gerrymandering of districts. In the U.S. House, only about 30 out of 435 districts are truly competitive. The politicians have picked the voters they want, rather than the other way around. Bovard argues that we ought to regard elections as "reverse slave auctions" wherein the largely clueless mass of people get to select which gang of politicians will control their lives.

Freedom, democracy, and the Constitution

But the illusion of freedom must be maintained, and that is why modern politicians and their intellectual supporters repeatedly conflate the terms "freedom" and "democracy." The people are constantly told that ours is a free society *because we have elections*. Our endless foreign military escapades are justified because we are supposedly *building democracy*. It is as if, merely by saying the word "democracy," politicians can induce a sort of posthypnotic trance in people, who have been conditioned to think, "It's democratic, therefore it must be good."

Furthermore, much of what government does today is done covertly. The less the people know, the happier they'll be. Presidents can issue Executive Orders to do almost anything, from confiscating gold to declaring people to be "enemy combatants." Government documents can easily be placed beyond public scrutiny, and Bovard shows that this is becoming more and more prevalent as politicians choose increasingly to hide behind a "trust us" smokescreen. The bureaucracy has the power to issue regulations with the force of law and then punish violators through administrative procedures. The judiciary can freely ignore the Constitution to arrogate power to itself or to confer power on other branches of government.

An especially disturbing case in this regard is the Supreme Court's upholding of the "Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act," which severely restricts First Amendment rights to criticize political candidates. In the name of protecting "the appearance of fairness," the Court gave its assent to a measure that shields incumbents from attack and thereby makes our elections even more of a joke.

Bovard draws a sharp contrast between the government envisioned by the nation's Founders and the government we have today. At the time of the founding, government was to have minimal power, and it was expected that the vigilant, well-read electorate consisting of property owners would ensure that governmental power was kept strictly confined. Now, with attention deficit democracy, almost everyone is entitled to vote, but few have the slightest idea of freedom, property rights, or the Constitution's limits on state power. Consequently, government has expanded into almost every corner of Americans' lives. Few of them notice or care.

In this pathetic circumstance, politicians find that they can get away with just about anything. Bovard writes,

The less people understand about how government works, the easier it is to get them to focus on promised results rather than actual procedures. Due process becomes a mere phrase, or even a pointless distraction in the pursuit of a Great Protector. This is reflected by the tacit acceptance by many Americans that an election victory entitles a politician to "do what he thinks right."

Whereas Jefferson thought that politicians had to be bound down by the chains of the Constitution, most people now see no danger in big government as long as it is in the hands of someone who is "trustworthy." That explains why political advertising these days is overwhelmingly geared toward creating a nice impression of a candidate.

Beyond any doubt, attention deficit democracy has gotten the United States into a terrible situation. After more than 200 depressing pages, does the author have any encouraging words? Not really. "The problem," Bovard says, "is far deeper than the current crop of rascals in Washington." The problem is the citizenry itself. "If Americans want politicians to be less predatory, there is no substitute for a higher class of citizens."

Most Americans have absorbed the propaganda of the political machines, of the government schools, and of the interest groups that feed incessantly at the public trough. They believe that they are "free" because they occasionally get to vote and because "The Star-Spangled Banner" says that we live in "the land of the free." Overwhelmingly, they are content with the general outlines of the welfare-warfare state we have grown into.

"It is unclear whether liberty can be revived in America," Bovard concludes. Unhappy words, but after such a pessimistic book, a glittering, optimistic finale just wouldn't ring true. All the political momentum in this country is toward the growth of government and the further contraction of freedom. If you doubt that, try asking a political candidate what laws he wants to see *repealed*. The result will be either stunned silence or some artful evasion. Almost no politician is thinking about repealing laws — or cutting government spending — or dismantling bureaucracies. Democrats and Republicans quibble over minor details but are virtually unanimous in their support for everything the Leviathan they have created does.

Only a great philosophical change can repair the tremendous damage that attention deficit democracy has wrought, but it is hard to see how that can happen in a country where most of the people resemble the inhabitants of Orwell's *1984* more than they do the resolute individuals who fought for liberty 230 years ago. One must contemplate the possibility that it might be easier to recover freedom in the face of a vicious dictatorship than in a country afflicted with attention deficit democracy.

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