



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

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

American Democracy Indicted **by Anthony Gregory**

[Attention Deficit Democracy](#) by James Bovard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 291 pages.

“If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” So says a popular bumper sticker. Indeed, those of us who have been paying attention to the political scene for years have often found ourselves outraged. The president’s approval rating has gone up and down, but throughout his five years in office never has public outrage been quite commensurate with the levels of incompetence, deception, and criminality coming from Washington. The same was true under Clinton. People are simply not paying attention.

There are few writers who pay more attention to the political follies of our time and who provide their readers with more meticulously documented reasons to be outraged than James Bovard, whose new book, *Attention Deficit Democracy*, presents his diagnosis of what is so terribly wrong with modern American democracy.

Whether we see it as a fundamental ailment or mere symptom, the American people are largely ignorant of political reality — deeply ignorant. This has been true for some time, and Bovard cites numerous polls from the last several election cycles that all indicate a staggering lack of simple understanding. In 2000, the University of Michigan “conducted a comprehensive survey of Americans’ political knowledge” and discovered that “only 15 percent knew the name of any candidate for the House of Representatives from their congressional district; only 11 percent could identify William Rehnquist as the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and only 9 percent knew that Trent Lott was the Senate majority leader.”

Debunking new and old notions about the fail-safe virtues of democracy, advanced by authorities ranging from philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau to today’s social theorists of the political science establishment, Bovard questions the premise defended by modern academics that “voter ignorance is no threat to popular government.” In fact, even when it comes to exceedingly important issues and elections, “ignorance and delusions have become the dominant factors in presidential approval — and thus in setting the nation’s direction.”

To demonstrate the apparent inverse relationship between public understanding of the government and the severity of the issues at hand, Bovard takes on a number of sacred cows in the war on terror. He reminds us that 9/11 perversely produced in most Americans far more trust in the government that had just failed to protect their compatriots in the greatest intelligence debacle in U.S. history. And “nowhere was Americans’ ignorance more profitable for Bush than on the war with Iraq,” says Bovard, an issue on which, the author reminds us, Americans, and especially Bush voters, displayed unbelievable ignorance and complacency, falling for the administration line that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction and operational ties to al-Qaeda. Shortly before the 2004 election, a *Newsweek* poll found that 42 percent of Americans believed Saddam was directly behind 9/11.

Fear of foreign enemies, but also of domestic hardships, seemed the prime motivation for voters in November 2004: “Voters could choose whether they would be killed by terrorists if they voted for Kerry or whether they would be left destitute and tossed out in the street if they voted for Bush.” Nearly everyone has come to see the government as the source of their “freedom from fear.”

But ignorance and fear do not a prudent democracy make. Instead, they help foster what Bovard perceptively calls “Battered Citizen Syndrome”: “In the same way that some battered wives cling to their abusive husbands, the more debacles the government causes, the more some voters cling to rulers.” And “the more fears government fans, the fewer people will recall the danger of government itself. The more frightened people become, the more prone they will be to see their rulers as saviors rather than as potential oppressors.”

Independent Institute senior fellow Robert Higgs argues that all governments rest on fear. The trouble with democracy is that it provides the illusion that the government *is* the people, and so all that is needed is an election to guarantee the government will have good intentions and benevolent policy. In assessing our modern democracy, Bovard bursts the bubble and takes on the illusions.

Deception and war

People tolerate excesses of all types from their government in the name of democracy. Most relevant today, and most notable throughout American history, is the issue of war. Regarding foreign policy, of which Americans tend to be more ignorant than they are of domestic policy, the U.S. government brags of its efforts abroad, excusing its acts of aggression as necessary tools of liberation, and claiming the right to wage virtually any war, tell any lie, and even torture people — all to make the world safe for democracy. The extent to which the American people go along with it all concerns Bovard, for he sees that such capitulation is what allows the abuses to continue.

Attention Deficit Democracy presents a nice little summary of the U.S. government's questionable military and diplomatic legacy in the name of democracy — touching on the contradictions in the Spanish-American War, World War I, and various Progressive-Era interventions in Latin America; the excessive friendliness towards Stalin's regime in World War II (during which "Harold Ickes, one of FDR's top aides, proclaimed that communism was 'the antithesis of Nazism' because it was based on 'belief in the control of the government, including the economic system, by the people themselves'"); the Alliance for Progress; the horrific Vietnam war; numerous CIA coups; and Reagan's National Endowment for Democracy.

Bovard's treatment of covert operations and overt foreign aid programs in his chapter "Messianic Democracy" is one of the premier treats of the book, as the author documents case after case of folly, foolishness, and fraud in the U.S. government's attempts to meddle in foreign elections, assassinate and oust foreign leaders, and secretly fund revolutionary groups and candidates — all in the name of "democracy" but, more often than not, yielding incredibly perverse results. From Reagan's secret funding of the Nicaraguan Contras to Clinton's deployment of military forces to protect Aristide's regime in Haiti, the reader sees one example after another of how the "pro-democracy" impetus behind U.S. foreign policy typically has the real-world consequence of supporting one homicidal tyrant or gang of thugs over another.

The first casualty in war is the truth, and to defend the perennially belligerent foreign policies of Washington, American politicians lie. In the name of democracy, wars are waged, and in the name of those wars, deception becomes just another policy tool. Unfortunately, the American people seem to swallow the lies happily as if it's their duty as citizens.

American wartime presidents, from Polk to Truman and from Wilson to Johnson, have told the bloodiest, most important lies in U.S. history. In more recent years, as Bovard compellingly shows, presidents have relied on a barrage of brazen lies to prop up their case for war.

A partisan of neither major party, only of liberty, Bovard sums up the lies surrounding Clinton's Kosovo war of the late 1990s. Clinton and his cabal called the terroristic Kosovo Liberation Army "freedom fighters"; distorted the history of the region and exaggerated the Balkans' threat to the world; cried "genocide" when in fact the killings were far fewer in number than what was suggested; lied about the precision of the NATO bombing campaign; and disingenuously told the Serbian people that they would be protected by the United States when peace broke out. Bovard also takes issue with what Clinton's "aides labeled the Clinton doctrine" — which the author says boils down to the principle "that the U.S. government is allowed to attack foreign nations on false charges."

As a helpful reminder that today's Republican administration is guilty of repeated deception, Bovard lays out the case plainly, citing the shameless lies of such officials as Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney. The book's focus on Clinton and Bush alike reminds us that

wartime deception cannot be addressed by simply switching the party that occupies the White House.

We have come to the point where Americans, confident that their democratic rulers will behave virtuously, have empowered Leviathan and granted their rulers a de facto “right to lie for 72 hours.” “As long as the lies are not exposed in the same news cycle,” Bovard explains, “the refutations may as well be done in a different century.” The political establishment tells as many lies as it wants because the people have come down with a bad case of attention deficit democracy; they forget what it was that got them riled up and so supportive of the president’s new power grab or military invasion only days after it happened and the lies have been refuted.

Tolerance for torture

Nowhere is the public acquiescence to political criminality uglier, and nowhere is the author more compelling and damning in his case against modern American democracy, than in the new tolerance people have towards torture as acceptable policy. In perhaps his most powerful chapter, Bovard takes on the torture state, setting to rest once and for all the absurd defenses and denials of U.S. torture in the war on terror.

A review of this length cannot possibly do justice to this chapter, but suffice it to say that Bovard has done his research and nailed the case against the administration, whose officials, all the way to the top, clearly authorized interrogation procedures that can be defined only as torture — although, as Bovard notes, a leaked Justice Department memo, prepared at the request of then-White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, “began by largely redefining torture out of existence. It then explained why even if someone died during torture, the torturer might not be guilty if he felt the torture was necessary to prevent some worse evil.” In the memo’s own words,

Because Section 2340 requires that a defendant act with the specific intent to inflict severe pain, the infliction of such pain must be the precise objective.... Even if the defendant knows that severe pain will result from his actions, if causing such harm is not his objective, he lacks the requisite specific intent even though the defendant did not act in good faith.”

In other words, torture is not torture unless the person doing it is doing it *only* to bring about pain.

A Pentagon report of 3,000 pages (only 177 of which were released publicly) investigating the Abu Ghraib scandal and announced by Maj. Gen. George Fay in August 2004 found numerous cases of alleged serious abuse, including the “highly probable” allegation, in its words, that a detainee “was left naked in his cell for extended periods, cuffed in his cell in stressful positions ... made to ‘bark like a dog, being forced to crawl on his stomach while MPs spit and urinated on him, and being struck causing unconsciousness’ ... [and] beaten with a broom.... [A] chemical

light was broken and poured over his body.... During this abuse a police stick was used to sodomize” the prisoner.

The torture allegations go far beyond what was seen in the Abu Ghraib prison photos leaked in 2004. The scandal reaches many other prisons in Iraq as well as Afghanistan and Guantanamo. Bovard presents a disgusting picture of the repulsive systematic abuse that prisoners, including many innocent people rounded up for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, have endured, as well as some particularly horrifying stories of rape, sex abuse, extreme torture, and murder.

The American people have come to tolerate, even embrace, the barbaric policy of torture, and Bovard has been paying attention and is outraged. It is a sign of a truly dysfunctional political system and troubling political culture. The images at Abu Ghraib released to the public, which show much less gruesome abuse than the photos seen by senators and stories reported elsewhere in credible sources, should have alone caused a revolt against the fundamental mechanisms of today’s government. To convey the severity of the situation, and its implications for the foreign policy-goal of winning Muslim hearts and minds, Bovard forcefully writes,

Many Americans have remained oblivious to the impact that the Abu Ghraib photos and other torture reports have on foreigners. How would Americans have responded if the roles had been reversed? Consider the case of Jessica Lynch, the 20-year-old blond, blue-eyed, attractive West Virginian Army supply clerk captured after her supply convoy was attacked during the invasion of Iraq.... What if Americans had seen photos of Lynch with blood running from cuts on her thighs, cowering before attack dogs lurching at her? What if Americans saw photos of a hooded Lynch with wires attached to her body, looking like she was awaiting electrocution? What if Americans saw videos of Lynch screaming as she was being assaulted by Iraqi captors? Such evidence would likely have swayed millions of Americans to support dropping nuclear bombs on Iraq. And yet many Americans refuse to recognize how similar evidence inflames Arabs’ attitudes toward the United States.

Blind trust in government

After reviewing sociological literature about why people trust or distrust the state — often written by proponents of greater trust in government — the author presents the discomfiting reality: people are inclined to trust the government more than it deserves. And although “blind trust in government is often portrayed as a harmless error — as if it were of no more account than saying pagan prayers to a pagan deity that didn’t exist” — Bovard insists that “the notion that rulers are entitled to trust is the most expansive entitlement program of them all.” Indeed,

Blind trust in government has resulted in far more carnage than distrust of government.... It was people who believed and who followed orders who carried out the Nazi Holocaust, the Ukrainian terror-famine, the Khmer Rouge blood bath, and the war crimes that characterize conflicts around the globe.

Post-9/11 America “vivifies the danger of excessive trust in government” but is only the latest example of the modern political climate that Bovard says is burdened by “intellectual passive obedience” — “preemptively quieting one’s doubts about the statements of one’s rulers” and “viewing political (and all other) reality through a moral lens supplied by one’s rulers.”

It has now gotten to the point that elections are no more than “reverse slave auctions,” where the people every two and four years vote for their masters, who then obtain near absolute power. This is largely because of a feeling of dependency people have, so that “instead of seeking representatives to safeguard their rights, people now seek strong leaders or saviors to redeem their lives and protect them from all harm, 24/7.”

“Absolute power” is not much of an exaggeration. Bovard reminds us of the ever-increasing power of the administration to designate people as “enemy combatants” and thus strip them of all procedural rights.

Even if a person has no affiliation with terrorist organizations, they can still be classified as an enemy combatant.... Bush has repeatedly referred to people locked up at Guantanamo as “illegal non-combatants.” But the presidential label “enemy combatant” is still sacrosanct even when the president effectively admits it makes no sense. They are “illegal” simply because the president says so.

And yet, Americans still believe they are free because they can vote. There is a bipartisan illusion that democracy is liberty itself and that state power is non-aggressive if checked every few years by a majority vote. These delusions achieve their most absurd levels under the guise of the so-called Democratic Peace Theory, which Bovard gracefully unravels. He gives us several counterexamples to the idea that democracies never fight each other, and takes on the methodology used by democratic peace theorists, which appears to involve the redefining of the concepts to fit their tautological conclusions: Democracies don’t fight each other, and when they seem to, one of them is therefore not a democracy.

Some advocates of democratic peace talk as if democratic governments are pacifist entities, almost incapable of militarism. Bush declared at a 2005 press conference that “a democracy reflects the will of the people, and people don’t like war. They don’t like conflict.” Yet during the 2004 presidential campaign, Bush constantly portrayed himself as a war president.

Bovard convincingly argues that the Democratic Peace Theory as a prescription for U.S. foreign policy is actually a recipe for perpetual aggressive war and imperialism. And war, as Bovard reminds the reader, is devastating to the liberties that democracy is supposed to protect.

Bovard argues that, in mistaking democracy for liberty and the interests of their rulers for those of their own, the American people have come to suffer a “Big Picture myopia,” whereby no number of specific political atrocities or disasters can knock them out of their stupor of believing that their democratic government, overall, is good and free. In a stark example of the disparity between myopic optimism and political reality, Bovard chronicles the brutal sanctions imposed by the United States through the United Nations on Iraq throughout the 1990s, which caused hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children to die. After destroying the sewage treatment infrastructure of Iraq, the U.S. government forbade the importation of needed foods and medicines by prohibiting oil exports — leading to “epidemics of gastroenteritis, cholera, and typhoid,” as a 1995 article in an Air Force publication reported.

But instead of the proper outrage over this war crime, more Americans were stirred up by the oil-for-food scandal.

The selective indignation over the oil-for-food bribes exemplified Big Picture myopia. There was no sense that any U.S. government official should be held responsible — or even obliged to answer questions — on the carnage the sanctions inflicted on the Iraqi people.... There was probably a hundred times more coverage in the U.S. media in late 2004 and early 2005 of the oil-for-food corruption scandal than of the catastrophic loss of life that resulted from the blockade.

And it is all because the media, like most Americans, have come to equate democracy and freedom and regard an occasional national vote as the only necessary check on political power. Americans assume their nation to be essentially free and peace-loving. They do not properly fear their rulers or even know what is being done to them in their own name.

Bovard says, “The notion that democracy automatically produces liberty hinges on the delusion that ‘people are obeying themselves.’” But,

if the citizen is the government, why are there far harsher penalties for any private citizen who pushes, threatens, or injures a federal employee than the punishment for similar actions against private citizens? Why are governments allowed to claim sovereign immunity when their employees injure or kill private citizens?

Attention Deficit Democracy is an indictment of the modern American democratic state. It is an indictment of the American people, who have lost interest in the sweeping and dangerous powers their rulers have grabbed and abused in recent history, especially since 9/11 but also

going back many years before that. Following in the tradition of his other books, Bovard carefully documents hundreds of instances of government wrongdoing and deceit in domestic and foreign policy. But more than in his other recent works, he draws on history and on sociological insights to form his diagnosis of the general affliction in modern America. The book shows that the problem is nonpartisan and deeply seated in American culture and will not be likely to reverse simply when another man moves into the Oval Office. Things must considerably change for our democratic government to stop ravaging the freedoms it is supposed to guard. The American people must reclaim their libertarian heritage, and understand liberty and the limits and dangers of government power, even when brandished by a popularly elected power elite. They must start paying attention, and thus start being more outraged. Reading *Attention Deficit Democracy* is a perfect place to start.

Anthony Gregory is a research assistant at the [Independent Institute](#) and serves as policy advisor to The Future of Freedom Foundation. He is a writer and musician who lives in Berkeley, California. He earned his bachelor's degree in history at UC Berkeley where he was president of the Cal Libertarians. He has written for [RationalReview.com](#), the [Libertarian Enterprise](#), and [LewRockwell.com](#). See his webpage, [AnthonyGregory.com](#), for more articles and personal information.

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