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## **Piercing through the Myths, Lies, and Stupidity** **by George C. Leef**

*Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity* by John Stossel (Hyperion 2006); 304 pages; \$24.95.

John Stossel, anchor of the ABC News program *20/20*, is a rarity among the ranks of American media personalities. He's a skeptic when it comes to everything except freedom. He even calls himself a libertarian. Over the years, he has made a very good career in TV journalism, poking holes in the self-inflated posturing of union leaders, environmental zealots, businessmen who demand government favors, and, most of all, politicians.

Stossel's favorite move is to confront such people with hard questions and then record their answers (usually evasions, unresponsive hostility, or pure blather) for the public to evaluate. I recall an interview Stossel had with Donald Trump several years ago. When Stossel asked a pointed question about Trump's effort to have his political friends use the power of eminent domain to take the property of a woman who didn't want to sell to him, "The Donald" stormed off the set in a huff. Bravo, Stossel!

*Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity* is a book based mainly on Stossel's iconoclastic reporting. Some of the material is of a consumer watchdog nature ("Is there really any reason to buy bottled water?"), some has to do with problems of everyday life ("Are men really better drivers than women?") and some confront commonly held beliefs ("Are you more likely to be stopped if you're driving a red car?"), but the core of the book is about the false beliefs people hold regarding politics. Everywhere he looks — government schooling, regulations, environmental scare-mongering, subsidies, and so forth — Stossel sees that ordinary people have been fed a diet of baloney to cover up the fact that some people use politics to take life, liberty, and property from other people.

Stossel's romp through the myths, lies, and stupidity that big government and its retinue of admirers and sycophants rely on covers many juicy targets.

## Public schooling

Let's start with "public education." The chapter "Stupid Schools" is drawn from the material in Stossel's January 2006 television special that brilliantly illuminated the waste and ineffectiveness of government-run schools. Throughout the book, Stossel uses boxes containing one statement that's a myth followed by another statement that's true. His first such box in the schooling chapter reads,

Myth: Educating children is too important to be left to the uncertainty of market competition.

Truth: Educating children is too important to be left to a government monopoly.

In the course of this chapter, we are introduced to a young man named Dorian. He is 17, a senior in a public high school in South Carolina, and can barely read even the simplest material. Here is Stossel's conversation with Dorian:

Stossel: You know there is a whole world that can open up to you, if you are able to read.

Dorian: Yeah, I know that. I know if I could read better, I wouldn't be such a problem.

Stossel: Did they try to teach you to read?

Dorian: From time to time.

Stossel: Well, what did they do?

Dorian: They just tell you to read by yourself. Go home and read, which, uh, I wouldn't.

Stossel: But they kept moving you ahead in class?

Dorian: Yes, sir.

Now, if the official pronouncements about the deep concern of the education establishment for the success of every student were to be believed, the South Carolina public-school system would be doing everything possible to help this young man learn to read. Instead, the lack of concern is astounding. At a meeting to discuss Dorian's academic progress, the principal said, "I've seen great progress in him. I don't have any concerns." It's easy to see why this attitude prevails — the money keeps rolling in whether the results are good or lousy. (A point Stossel might have made here is that government schools often can squeeze more money out of taxpayers through failure than success.)

Dorian, by the way, was subsequently enrolled in a reading program at a Sylvan Learning Center. As a result, his reading level improved by two grade levels after only 72 hours of instruction.

What really infuriates the public-education establishment about Stossel is not so much that he casts doubt on the efficacy of their schools — it's always possible to haul out "education experts" who will attest that the schools are doing the best they can and just need more funding

— but that he depicts them as money grubbers of the worst sort. In his writing, teachers and union officials sound as though their overriding concern is raiding the wallets of the taxpayers. For example, when Stossel observes that South Carolina public schools spend an average of \$10,000 per student and asks a school official how much more would be enough, he gets this answer: “Twenty thou, twenty-five, thirty. The more, the better.” Makes you wonder — can these people spell “parasite”?

Among the other education myths Stossel punctures are that teaching certificates are necessary to ensure competence, that excellent teachers are rewarded, that teachers are underpaid, and that home schooling is just for religious zealots who don’t care whether their children don’t learn to socialize. The chapter is devastating to the government schooling monopoly.

### **Monster government**

In another chapter, Stossel takes on the myths, lies, and stupidity that prop up Monster Government. “Growing up,” he writes,

I believed that government was a good thing, like Mommy and Daddy. It helped and protected us. It took me a while to understand that government could become too much of a good thing; patronizing, overprotective, and destructive of our liberty.

After years of looking at government with cold rationality, observing actual results rather than stated intentions, Stossel has concluded that it’s mostly a gigantic rip-off. Republicans and Democrats take an equal pounding.

One of his favorite targets is agricultural subsidies. Farmers and the politicians who pander for their support have built up a stout wall of myths to protect the programs that compel the taxpayer to subsidize the growing (or not growing) of crops. Stossel interviews two brothers who own a 12,000-acre farm in California and receive government price-support payments. They claim that their costs have risen faster than prices and they wouldn’t make any profit without the subsidies. Stossel replies, “To that, I say, ‘So what?’ Not making a profit doesn’t entitle them to our money.” The farmers can only retort that the government has decided to help them, “so we’re winning and you’re losing.” I suppose that’s the adult version of “nyah, nyah.”

Politicians love to parade around as great benefactors of the people, but Stossel wants his readers to understand that most politicians are just “busybodies who want to force their preferences on us.” Exhibit A is the mayor of Friendship Heights, Maryland, who pushed for an ordinance to ban smoking in any public place, even *outdoors*. When Stossel confronts the health-zealot mayor, he lamely replies, “Well, we’re elected to promote the general welfare and this is

part of the general welfare.” The pleasant-sounding term “the general welfare” is used as cover for lots of petty tyranny like that.

### **The legal profession**

The legal profession also comes in for some well-deserved scorn and derision. After excoriating tort lawyers for lawsuits that line their pockets, brought in jurisdictions where they have judges who have been elected with their support, Stossel gets to one of my own pet peeves, namely prohibitions against the unauthorized practice of law. Those are laws that restrict the field of legal work and advice to members of the lawyers’ guild — that is, licensed attorneys. Stossel introduces us to a man who was arrested and jailed in Louisiana (by a squad of seven policemen!) for the crime of helping some residents of a nursing home fill out legal forms for wills and bankruptcy. You can get two years in prison for that in Louisiana.

When Stossel confronts the district attorney who is prosecuting the case, the DA justifies his action by saying that an unlicensed person might not give good legal advice. Stossel replies that not all lawyers give good advice either. Furthermore, none of the residents had complained about the man’s work for them and they could not afford the fees that a “real” lawyer would charge. Stossel sums it up:

The prosecutor told us that Jerome was a threat to the public because he was giving advice in a “technical field.” But helping people fill out forms for wills, bankruptcy, or mutually consensual divorces is not so “technical” that only the holy mandarins of the legal bar should be allowed to do it.

Once again, Stossel has demolished the myths and lies that keep the average person from seeing that the law has been perverted into a device for killing competition so that an influential group can unjustly gain.

### **Conservatives, liberals, and libertarians**

At the end of the book, Stossel explains why he isn’t a “conservative” or a “liberal” in the contemporary sense:

As I write this, Republicans are attacking oil companies for price “gouging,” they’re trying to amend the Constitution to ban gays from marrying, and they just created a new Medicare entitlement. If that’s conservatism today, then it holds little appeal for me.”

On the other hand,

liberalism has come to mean spending more on everything — speech police, failed poverty programs that reward dependency, a bigger nanny state telling us we cannot eat fatty foods, workplace rules that stifle opportunity, and absurd environmental regulations.

He owns up to holding the libertarian philosophy, but admits that he doesn't really like the word. "I want the word 'liberal' back!" he writes. "Today's liberals stole it and perverted it." Amen to that.

My only real complaint about the book is that quite a few chapters don't convey the anti-statist message that the author wants to get across. The myths, lies, and downright stupidity Stossel attacks often have nothing to do with beliefs regarding government and politics. Okay — cell phones don't cause gas pumps to explode and full moons don't cause people to behave crazily — but if the target is our omnipotent state, it would have made sense to have kept the work focused on that. Goodness knows that there's enough material to fill up dozens of books on the harms of big government.

Nevertheless, *Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity* is an easy, fun read that could get a lot of people who don't usually think about government and politics to drop their support for the philosophy and policies that are gradually wrecking the United States.

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