

AMERICA: THE BOOK

A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction

"As to the presidency, the two happiest days of my life were those of my entrance upon the office and my surrender of it."

— Martin van Buren, 1847

"The power was nice, but frankly I could've used more power."

— Richard Nixon, 1977



One of those tongue in cheek exercises that totally revives one's faith in the value of satire, mostly gentle sometimes brutal, applied to the government and its flotilla of fellow travelers. Not only does Stewart skewer the corporate-state dinosaur, he dishes out a healthy amount of humor at the expense of the booboisie.[1] It's a good book to read for a laugh and to get your mind right before falling asleep at night.

Written at the juncture of the second term of Bush II, America: The Book does have a slight bias for lampooning the peculiar lunacies of that administration... but only slightly. By keeping a more universal perspective, the book retains relevance now on the eve of the second year of the Obamanon's administration. [That's if you want to call what Obama is doing an administration; more accurately he's the best and most efficient lead clerk the power elite have ever elected to the American presidency.]

The unfortunate problem for books on political humor is that our system is in such dire extremis nothing is funny anymore. How does one perform a roast of the continuation of torture and rendition, or the mugging of the public treasury by Goldman Sachs, or the perpetuation of the coverup of the federales' actions in the 9/11 attacks, or the role of depleted uranium munitions in the deaths and birth defects of hundreds of thousands of human beings yet to come, or the continued ravages to our environment and property by government-franchised corporate scorched-earthers, and so on. Indeed, it's difficult to be funny now with Obama steering the ship of state onto the shoals... at least when Bush was destroying our country, we could make fun of his feeble-mindedness.

Jon Stewart rises above these problems by being clever and diffuse in the target of his satire. Much of the writing pertains to the widespread dumbness or cluelessness of the people. And yes, after a fashion that can be funny. Once again, however, none of the people with more serious foibles is able to discern the humor. The great majority of those who will read and appreciate the book are going to be liberty-leaning intellectuals, and that's thanks to Jon Stewart's evenhandedness in removing the cloak of respectability of statism left or right.

From a reading of Stewart's history of democracy preliminaries[2], you get the gestalt of what a treat the book will be all the way through. Nobody nails politics with the penetrating humor of Jon Stewart:

Rome: the First Republicans

The fall of Athens was followed by the emergence, overnight, of Rome. At first glance its people[a] appear to have enjoyed a system of representative

government similar to ours. True, behind its façade of allegedly "representative officials lurked a de facto oligarchy ruled by entrenched plutocrats...

However, there was very little real democracy in Rome. While the Senate theoretically represented the people, in reality its wealthy members covertly pursued pro-business legislation on behalf of such military-industrial giants as JavelinCorp (Fig. 1.5), United Crucifix (Fig 1.6), and a cartel of resource-exploiting companies...

So that gives you a flavor for the whole book. Comical juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary that leaves the moralizing out of it, hence keeps the humor. [The best political comedians are able to keep the material light, while making genuinely funny observations. It's not easy. Again, how would you satirize Hitler... Mel Brooks' movie *The Producers* notwithstanding? Heavy is not funny. Someone like Mort Sahl or Dick Gregory back in the day are examples of political humorists who could not overcome their anger (or ego) in order to become genuinely funny.]

Another thing you'll note in *America: The Book* is that the writers include at least as many pages of tables and figures as text. More times than not the best gems come from a table entry or an obscure footnote, such as:

- The table on philosophical roots of American democracy has a column devoted to Jesus Christ. The final entry is a 'Fun Fact': "Jesus lived to be 33, one fewer than the number of home runs Boog Powell hit in 1966!"
- In the heading of the same column, each of the figures gives the years of his life such as 427-347 B.C. for Plato, 1469-1527 A.D. for Niccolo Machiavelli. The years for Jesus are given 0-33 A.Himself.

Now that's a riot. Moreover, it's sublime subtlety. Thus to get the most out of *America: The Book*, you need to stay with it and take your time. This makes the book the ultimate before-bed reader or, even, bathroom reader. I could make this the longest review in the world by simply pointing out the several notable items I tagged during my reading... and I tried to be judicious.

Speaking of judicious, on page 90, the book under the heading of Landmark Supreme Court Cases spoofs several of the major decisions of the Supremes. Such as *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), etc. Under *Dred Scott* (1856) here's what Stewart's team laid down:

The Court finds that *Dred Scott*, a fugitive slave, is not a person but property, and therefore is entitled neither to file suit in federal court nor to remain free in the North. Not the verdict *Scott* was hoping for. Historians agree the Court battle sapped him and when he went back to being a slave, his heart just wasn't in it.

Also in the area of the Supreme Court, *America: The Book* performs a disgusting public service by superimposing the nine Supreme Court justices' heads on naked bodies of roughly the same age, gender, and size. In a feature on pages 98-99, titled *Dress the Supreme Court*, the instructions state, "Below are the nine current justices of the Supreme Court. They are naked. Restore their dignity by matching each justice with his or her respective robe." Then on the facing page nine identical black robes are laid out... with the exception the women's robes have a special white-color scarf, and the Chief

Justice's robe has gold stripes on the arms. What a wonderful way to encourage a fitting respect for the top dawgs interpreting our rights away.

The book comments on third parties, primarily pointing out Ralph Nader's Green Party run in 2000 that (in addition to massive vote fraud in Florida and other states) may have cost Al Gore the election:

From time to time in our history, there have been movements to create third parties. When introduced into a marriage, a third party can add a dash of spice and unpredictability to a relationship long loveless and dead. But as they say in electoral politics, "Two's company, three's a problem that must be undermined through legislative obstacles to their financing." (p. 108) Then on a full-color spread on the next two pages, we see a picture of a graveyard identifying on tombstones all the third parties that have lived and lost over time. Not accurate for Greens or Libertarians, the artist nonetheless adorns the Greens' tombstone with Bush-Cheney stickers, and on the engraving for the LP states:

Libertarian Party:
1971 - 0000
Ahhhh,
we should
have worn
our seatbelts

At least he got the birth year correct. And even though Stewart makes a funny, the identification of the LP with subordinate issues that affect a small number of people is typical of the way in which the controlled media—I have to say even the Daily Show of Stewart and Colbert are guilty of this, too—effectively marginalizes the ideas of liberty in the mass mind. But you take what you can get, and as everyone knows, Jon Stewart is a bona fide libertarian on peace and civil liberties. And based on his respectful treatment of Ron Paul, we can be fairly confident Jon favors the free market (noncorporatist model) in economics.

America: The Book (subtitle: a citizens guide to democracy inaction) also features commentaries sprinkled throughout by a number of "correspondents." One Samantha Bee—apparently a regular on the Daily Show, represents the Canadian viewpoint. Always delivered with deference and apology, e.g.:

We Have a Media in Canada, Too, You Know!

Sorry to bother you again. I just wanted to pop in here for a jif and let you know we have media in Canada, too! In fact, we have all the media — TV, radio, newspapers, and I think even the Internet now. They're just like yours, only ours tend to focus less on blowing things up and more on courtesy.... (p. 141)

Reminds me of a scene in one of Michael Moore's early movies, Canadian Bacon, where a Canadian provincial traffic cop stops some characters who are driving a truck sporting all amount of profanity. Instead of writing them a ticket for a morals offense, the cop (played by Dan Akroyd) nicks them for failing to express the profanity bilingually.

And of course, the book ends with a section on how Americans can better understand the many other countries of the world, that "International House of Horrors."

So if you're a Jon Stewart fan, or a political humor fan, or a literary attitude adjustment fan, consider picking up America: The Book and making it a regular part of your day. He

still finds many things to make gentle and not so gentle fun of, whether the US goes straight to Hell or whether we hang on as we optimists expect to restore the republic in a few short years. Note, if you should wish to purchase, and you're planning to buy via Amazon, please do so by going to this link with my Coffee Coaster tag:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/0446691860/?tag=thecofcoa-20>

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[1] The boobosie is a term originating from and popularized by HL Mencken, and it means basically the unthinking masses, particularly of the middle class in America. Actually, looking it up, I've been misspelling the term forever: it's Booboisie, with an i, and I believe Mencken initial-capped it.

[2] Though Jon Stewart is the name behind the book, and you can tell from the style of funny that he's doing most of the core writing, he had considerable help in the more subordinate descriptions, along with formatting and design. It should be considered a team effort with Stewart at the helm, with a healthy dose of guest contributions.

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Jon Stewart | America: The Book | Political Humor | Political Satire | Daily Show

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