

[PDF] The Assault On Reason

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Description:

The first question many people ask when hearing of a new book from Al Gore is, "Is it about the environment?" The answer is yes, but it's not (or, rather, not only) the kind of environment he wrote about in *Earth in the Balance* and of course painted such a vivid picture of in his Oscar-winning documentary (and companion book), *An Inconvenient Truth*. It's the political environment he's concerned about in *The Assault on Reason*: the way we debate and decide on the critical issues of the day. In an account that balances theoretical discussion of the foundations of democracy with a lacerating critique of the Bush administration, Gore argues that the marketplace of reasoned debate our country was founded on is being endangered by a variety of allied forces: the use of fear and the misuse of faith, the distractions of our entertainment culture, and the concentrations of power in the national media and the executive branch. In his essay and answers to our questions below, he introduces the crisis he sees, as well as the opportunity for its solution he envisions in the open forums of the Internet.

A Message from Al Gore to Amazon.com Readers

I've dedicated my book, *The Assault on Reason*, to my father, Senator Albert Gore Sr., the bravest politician I've ever known. In the 1970 mid-term elections, President Richard Nixon relied on a campaign of fear to consolidate his power. I was in the military at the time, on my way to Vietnam as an army journalist, and I watched as my father was accused of being unpatriotic because he was steadfast in his opposition to the War--and as he was labeled an atheist because he dared to oppose a constitutional amendment to foster government-sponsored prayer in the public schools. The 1970 campaign is now regarded by political historians as a watershed, marking a sharp decline in the tone of our national discourse--a decline that has only worsened in recent years as fear has become a more powerful political tool than trust, public consumption of entertainment has dramatically surpassed that of serious news, and blind faith has proven more potent than truth.

We are at a pivotal moment in American democracy. The persistent and sustained reliance on falsehoods as the basis of policy, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, has reached levels that were previously unimaginable. It's too easy and too partisan to simply place the blame on the policies of President George W. Bush. We are all responsible for the decisions our country makes.

Reasoned, focused discourse is vital to our democracy to ensure a well-informed citizenry. But this is difficult in an environment in which we are experiencing a new pattern of serial obsessions that periodically take over the airwaves for weeks at a time--from the O.J. Simpson and Michael Jackson trials to Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole Smith.

Never has it been more vital for us to face the reality of our long-term challenges, from the climate crisis to the war in Iraq to the deficits and health and social welfare. Today, reason is under assault by forces using sophisticated techniques such as propaganda, psychology, and electronic mass media. Yet, democracy's advocates are beginning to use their own sophisticated techniques: the Internet, online organizing, blogs, and wikis. Although the challenges we face are great, I am more confident than ever before that democracy will prevail and that the American people are rising to the challenge of reinvigorating self-government. It is my great hope that those who read my book will choose to become part of a new movement to rekindle the true spirit of America.

Questions for Al Gore

Amazon.com:Of all I've read and seen on climate change, I don't think anything has had quite the impact on me that those vivid maps of shrinking coastlines did in *An Inconvenient Truth*. You've spent years trying to communicate the threat of climate change and you've learned how to use compelling images to tell that story, but in this book you're very wary of the power of visual images to overwhelm reason with fear. How do you spur people to action in a crisis like this without using fear?

Gore: I often open the slideshow by talking about the "climate crisis." The English meaning of the word "crisis" conveys alarm, but the Chinese and Japanese expressions use two characters together: the first means danger, but the second means opportunity. The animations do help to convey some of that sense of danger--but the opportunities are enormous. We are beginning to see companies taking advantage of the new markets that are emerging as they innovate and put to market the technologies that we need to solve this crisis. Some have become ubiquitous, like the hybrid electric engine and compact fluorescent light bulb. There are thousands of opportunities like this all around us if governments will show the type of bold leadership that we need--and work with industry to exploit these opportunities.

Amazon.com: You describe two problems with television culture: it's a top-down system in which, as you say, "Individuals receive, but they cannot send," and its physiological vividness allows it to bypass our reason. The user-created communities that seem so promising on the Internet would seem to solve the first problem, but what about the second?

Gore: There are a number of barriers for individuals who want to communicate over TV. The major networks won't give average Americans a voice, and it is virtually impossible to start a channel. One solution, that I have worked on with my partner, Joel Hyatt, is the creation of Current TV, where viewers can submit content over the Internet to air on the channel.

With regards to the Internet, anyone with access to a computer and broadband can create a website or blog and post content. They can send information into the public forum. Of course, we need to continue to work to bridge the digital divide, to ensure that we expand the access of people to the Internet, but the threshold for entry is much lower than that of television.

Amazon.com: You're the chairman of Current TV, the interactive cable channel aimed at young people. Can you talk about the challenges of constructing a platform where the kind of substantive dialogue you are looking for can take place?

Gore: One of the things I talk about in the book is infotainment--the "well-amused" audience that is bombarded with the latest programming about O.J. Simpson, or JonBenet Ramsey, or Anna Nicole Smith. What we are trying to do, in part, is to provide a public forum for viewers to submit content about issues of concern to them. And they have, by the thousands, on issues from the war in Iraq to the environment to education and others. I am continually amazed by both the quality of the submissions and the breadth and depth of the subject matter.

Amazon.com: You have a chapter on the importance of checks and balances in government (in a sense, that's what the whole book is about), and we're seeing the effect that active oversight from Congress is having right now. For most of your eight years in office, you and Bill Clinton had to work with a Republican Congress. I'm sure that at times (say, 1998) that had its frustrations, but do you think it was valuable to have that balance, or did it prevent you from doing what you came into office to do?

Gore: Checks and balances are vital to the functioning of our system of government. Of course it can have its frustrations, but the Founders intended that we have a system whereby no one branch has too much control over the others. Ultimately, it is up to voters to decide the control of Congress and the White House and then for elected officials to work to serve the public interest and to try to implement policies that serve the country. These are core values that are at the heart of who we are as a nation.

Amazon.com: I wanted to ask about the Office of the Vice President. I think it's safe to say that the last two vice presidents, you and Dick Cheney, have been the most powerful and influential in our history. Why do you think that is?

Gore: I think the answer is very different in the two administrations, but in a world that is truly globalized, with a broader information ecology, with challenges ranging from a more complex system of international issues ranging from the climate crisis to asymmetric attacks, it is not a surprise that a President might choose to draw upon more advice from the office of the vice president than in the past. This is a trend that I would expect to continue under future presidents, as the range of the demands on the presidency will not diminish over time.

From Publishers Weekly Starred Review. As scathing as it is meticulous, Gore's treatise on reason juggernauts its way through the Bush administration, never even needing to include the controversial nature of Bush's presidential elections. He identifies the growing concentration of power in the executive branch virtually ignored by mainstream media. Drawing on the great political philosophers of history and his lengthy career in government, Gore contends that the loss of a genuine public forum in the age of radio and television has led to the decay of democracy. He delivers a serious critique of the United States tempered by hope and faith in the restoration of checks and balances. The articulated venom of Gore's words can be heard in Patton's voice as he narrates. He reads with an intensity that makes this already engaging prose compelling. Patton maintains a distinct smooth and edgy voice, but maintains a cadence that reminds listeners of Gore's own speaking mannerisms. In quoting historical figures, Patton's voice is distinct but not haughty or pompous. The combination of Patton's performance and Gore's words make this an impressive audiobook.

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