

# **America (the Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction Study Guide**

**America (the Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction by Jon Stewart**

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# Plot Summary

America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction was written by Jon Stewart and a team of writers in 2004 which pokes fun at American political institutions and attitudes. The book's other two authors were Ben Karlin, the executive producer of Jon Stewart's The Daily Show and David Javerbaum, the show's head writer. It is intended to mock United States high school social studies textbooks, and as such, is composed of various satirical exercises, study guides and quick facts.

Small articles are contributed by then Daily Show affiliates Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee and Ed Helms, and other pages have fake campaign stickers for different historical presidential candidates. The book appeared just before the 2004 election and in its first printing had an election guide that made fun of the candidates, but subsequent printings do not have the insert.

The book contains a study guide, a foreword, afterword, and so on, but it primarily comprised of nine chapters. Chapter 1, "Democracy before America," is a brief, satirical synopsis of world political history and American political history. It begins with a brief discussion of prehistoric man and Athenian democracy, moving through the Enlightenment and ending prior to the American revolution. Chapter 2, "The Founding of America," discusses various important events that led up to the American founding, such as the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party, the Articles of Confederation, and so on. The chapter relates real events and gives some factual content, despite its comedic intent.

Chapter 3, "The President: King of Democracy," analyzes the office of the presidency, explaining how it has evolved over time, its original powers and the powers it has since acquired. It also discusses various facts about historically important presidents. Chapter 4, "Congress, Quagmire of Freedom," engages in a largely factually accurate description of the intended and actual function of Congress. It includes a discussion of the rationale for the bicameral structure of Congress and a detailed explanation of how bills are passed, replete with genuine and frank discussions of how pork-barrel legislation works and how lobbyists have inordinate influence in the legislative process.

Chapter 5, "The Judicial Branch: It Rules," covers the workings of the Judicial Branch, covering Appellate and District Courts but mostly focusing on the Supreme Court; this chapter also includes the controversial photo-shopped images of naked Supreme Court justices (current in 2004). Chapter 6, "Campaigns and Elections: America Changes the Sheets," discusses the structure of American campaigns, political parties, fundraisers, elections and so on. Chapter 7, "The Media: Democracy's Guardian Angels/The Media: Democracy's Valiant Vulgarians," explains the proper role of the media in a free and democratic society and severely criticizes its present role.

Chapter 8, "The Future of Democracy: Four Score and Seven Years from Now," reflects on possible, but comedic and improbable futures for American democratic institutions, and Chapter 9, "The Rest of the World: International House of Horrors," notes that while

life may be difficult in the United States, it is far worse elsewhere and then outlines various facts about other regions of the world.



# Chapter 1, Democracy Before America

Stewart begins by reminding the reader that the United States is among the first if not the first representative democracy. But in present-day America, political participation has precipitously declined. Politicians have a ninety-nine percent incumbency rate, and the United States invades other countries to impose democracy on them. The chapter aims to trace the history of government prior to United States democracy to see how we moved from "there" to "here."

First came early man, who was basically an animal—primitive, lacking civic institutions, and so on. But eventually most people figured out that civilization was needed to survive and move forward. They would do better to cooperate. Next comes Athens, widely understood as the world's first democracy, and which had its own set of civic institutions, like courts, juries, assemblies and so on. The early Athenian democracy was simple.

Athens was followed by Rome, which also initially had representative government. But in fact Rome became a de facto oligarchy ruled by the rich. The American founders borrowed much from the Roman model, including its bicameral legislature. But Rome had little democracy; its lasting contribution to American society was its civil legal code.

From Rome, Stewart turns to the Magna Carta, the 1215 document which English barons forced King John to sign in order to safeguard their rights. It held that no man was above the law. This was the beginning of ending monarchy in Europe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after a long period of stagnation, the idea of human reason began to be exalted. Science began and democracy started to grow. This period also gave democracy its philosophical underpinnings, particularly with the idea of the social contract. This period would also lead to the American Revolution.

## Chapter 2, The Founding of America

Human progress was steady but slow. There had been great accomplishments, such as fire and the wheel. But nothing would rival the colonization and democratization of the new world. This process can be understood according to several dates. In 1492, Columbus discovered America, although this isn't really true. In 1620, the Pilgrims landed in the United States and established the first lasting American colony. It also brought religious fanaticism to the New World. In 1776, the United States broke with England and signed the Declaration of Independence.

This general period also brought the Tea Party in 1773 where the British government substantially increased the tax on tea. The English-American relationship had been deteriorating for some time, partly since the 1765 Stamp Act. Things worsened during the 1770 Boston Massacre.

The Declaration of Independence was the document that Thomas Jefferson wrote which declared independence from Britain. The document begins by listing the United States' grievances against the king. It also cited the idea that men were given natural rights to liberty by God and that these rights could be exercised to create a new nation. With this document, a new nation was born.

The Articles of Confederation was the first constitution of the United States, but they failed. The articles gave too little power to the central government. This led Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and others to write a new constitution and then sell it to the states. The Constitution would be the nation's "owner's manual." It created three branches of government and checks and balances, which were meant to prevent government power from becoming too concentrated. The United States was given a bulwark against tyranny, based on the rule of law, equality and respect for person and property.



## Chapter 3, The President, King of Democracy

The President of the United States is the most powerful and widely recognized person on earth. He is the commander-in-chief of the only remaining superpower and is sometimes seen as the world's policeman. The president is the economic, social and moral compass of the nation. The president does not hold office by birthright, but supposedly by merit. The 22nd Amendment prevents him from holding office longer than two terms, or eight years.

In Article II of the Constitution, the office of the presidency is thought to be a political compromise. It mixes strong central authority while avoiding the pitfalls of such authority. He was to be the chief administrator of the government, command the armed forces but be forced by law to relinquish the presidency after his term. The presidency could also be held by practically anyone. You needed to be a native citizen of the United States, a resident of fourteen years in the United States and thirty-five years of age.

The original presidents needed the approval of Congress to do almost anything. But the presidents of the last fifty years have regularly been accused of overstepping their authority. The modern president commands the armed forces whether he is a member of the military or not and it is his most important power. He is not supposed to be able to declare war without Congressional approval, and so to avoid this restraint, presidents now engage in "police action" without approval. The president can also negotiate treaties.

The president also cannot make laws. He can suggest laws and pressure Congress to pass laws, but he must have Congressional approval. However, he has a cabinet full of posts that allow him to extend his control. He can appoint ambassadors and judges as well, including federal judges, who are quite powerful. The president has various other powers as well. But the president's power has substantially expanded over time to where he is now the "Leader of the Free World."



## Chapter 4, Congress, Quagmire of Freedom

Congress is the gastrointestinal tract of the American body politic. It is vast and convoluted, its workings mysterious. To understand the purpose of Congress, two truths must be understood: (1) Society needs laws, since anarchy can be quite bad. You need more than zero but less than fascism. (2) People are busy, so representatives should work for people so they can pursue their own lives. The Constitution uses checks and balances to prevent Congress from becoming too powerful. Congressmen must be directly elected by regular citizens and so must follow the will of the people. The problem, however, is that people are still busy and so lobbyists take control. Direct elections instead are replaced by decisions among corporate lobbyists with huge amounts of money.

The Founders set up Congress believing that representative democracy would be the most stable and last form of government; second, when the Constitutional convention ended, they would be out of work. Thus, they produced a structure of government that would employ them for the rest of their lives. The difficulty arose when trying to decide how representatives would be apportioned, by state or by population.

As a result, the Founders endorsed a two-house structure of legislature, known as bicameral, one apportioned by state, the other by population. The House of Representatives would be apportioned by population and be re-elected every two years. The more deliberative senate would have two men from each state, no matter how small or unpopulated. Senators would be elected every six years. The House would be run by the Speaker of the House and the Senate by the Senate President Pro Tem. Each chamber would have its own officers, majority and minority leaders, whips and sergeant-at-arms. The Speaker of the House would be third in line for the presidency.

Law-making regulations also had to be laid down. Each piece of proposed legislation is a bill and members of Congress sponsor thousands of bills each year. Once a bill is tweaked, the bill heads to the appropriate committee, such as the Appropriations Committee or the Intelligence Committee. In committee, bills are considered and are marked up with additions, deletions and so on. The Senate Appropriations Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee review most bills.

Once out of committee, a bill moves to the floor in a floor action. Then the bill is debated and amendments can be added. Most of the time the amendments specify money for projects unrelated to the bill and that usually go to Congressional districts. These are often called "pork." The pork is usually pushed for by lobbyists. Lobbyists will often change the language of bills to suit their interests. The book then reviews various lobbies, like the gun lobby, NAACP, the labor lobby, Big Tobacco, the Christian Coalition, the AARP, and so on. Once the bill is past the lobbyists, it can move to the president's desk and then he can sign it or not.





Law-making is tedious and does not end. But the Constitution allows Congress to do more. It can also collect taxes and act as a check and balance on the other branches of government. It can control presidential appointments, treaties and the ability to declare war, along with weights and measures, raising militias, punishing piracy and printing money. When not running for re-election, Congress does the people's business. Supposedly, the people are the Congress and vice versa. But it looks like they don't really serve us, but instead serve special interests. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of how to write one's Congressperson.

## Chapter 5, The Judicial Branch, It Rules

Now that the first two branches of American government have been discussed, chapter five discusses the judicial branch, which Stewart describes as America's twenty-four-hour tech support, explaining how things should work. It is charged with interpreting the Constitution and is always mentioned last, and often regarded as the weakest branch of government. It flies under the radar and many there like it that way. It can control pornography, abortion, neo-Nazi marches and so on.

At the top of the branch is the Supreme Court. Unelected officials populate it and its proceedings are not televised. It seems undemocratic but it is supposed to be in order to protect it against public sentiment and expediency. They can base their decisions entirely on the Constitution. Below the Supreme Court are the district and federal appeals courts, and together they form the hierarchy of justice. The people who make up the judicial branch can make laws indirectly.

Again, the highest court is the Supreme Court. It is prestigious to be on it and everyone receives a lifetime appointment. Justices only leave the bench through retirement, incapacitation or removal. They can't be fired, laid off, downsized or out-sourced. The president nominates candidates to the Supreme Court and the senate confirms them.

Diversity has become a consideration, since for most of its existence the Court was dominated by white males. In 1967, Thurgood Marshall was the first black Supreme Court justice. But often the nominee is selected because the president thinks he will make decisions that the president agrees with. Once nominated, the candidate must go through a confirmation process that has grown politicized.

Judicial philosophies held by the nine justices go a long way towards determining their decisions. There are two basic philosophies: judicial activist and strict constructionist. A judicial activist sees the Constitution as a living document that can be adapted and re-interpreted to protect the needs of changing societies. Strict constructionists interpret the Constitution according to original intent; they are able to read the minds of the Founders and use their power only for good.

Courts are also often reflections of their chief justices and they take activist or anti-activist stands generally. The book then briefly notes some major Supreme Court justices, along with some famous cases. Members of the Supreme Court get there from practicing law and must rise up the ranks appropriately through a perilous legal trail.

The lower courts ease the burden on the Supreme Court to help them avoid excessive courts. The US district courts are the first stop for those who "make a federal case" over some issues. There are also U.S. courts of appeals, where court cases go when they are appealed after a decision by the U.S. district court. Then, from the U.S. court of appeals, a case can go on to the Supreme Court.

When you argue a case, each side gets a half-hour to make opening arguments. The court is expected to have already familiarized itself with the details. The court is usually quite aggressive with its questions. After oral arguments, justices go to chambers to formulate their decisions based on their interpretation of the Constitution. The majority then writes the decisions. It is that simple. In this way, their decisions become law: schools are desegregated, abortions legalized, etc. Their lifetimes of prejudice, preference, mood swings, etc. change everything and the issues they settle on become the law for good.

When a justice retires or dies, she is replaced by a new appointee. Then all legal matters can be reviewed again.



## Chapter 6, Campaigns and Elections, America Changes the Sheets

Chapter six concerns campaigns and elections, which are a democracy's "vetting" process. Campaigns and elections are where idealism and elegant design of American institutions are free to see if they can survive. Initially, campaigns and elections were seen as a mere means to peacefully transferring power, but after two centuries, the process has become its own rationale. They have become the most important aspects of democratic politics. Running for office takes as much as holding it.

The skills required to persuade votes often are the polar opposite of those needed to effectively govern. As a result, those who run for office are not those best suited to office, but rather those who want to be in power the most.

Running for office is a tough job which requires handshaking, faking interest in the elderly, etc. You must endure being vilified on television and your spouse and children looked into. As the country has grown, the scope of political campaigns has expanded. The cost has increased substantially and often requires a vast personal fortune. For instance, one's campaign might be sustained by incredibly expensive fundraisers. The best candidates know that they need powerful fundraising organizations; raising money takes time as well.

Candidates rarely do it alone; they are aided by the two major political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. Republicans are the party of nostalgia, which wants to take America back to a simpler and more moral past that never was. Democrats are utopians, trying to create a country that is so non-judgmental and fair that life is comprised by apologies. The two parties are giant down comforters that prevent candidates from having to endure independent thinking.

The parties have structures that help the candidates win financial support and produce enthusiastic supporters. Candidates agree to not take sides against the party. Each party has a platform which contains the group of beliefs that comprise its worldview; the two-party system as a result defines the two poles of acceptable political thought.

Sometimes third parties arise and produce something unpredictable. In 2000, Ralph Nader received several thousand votes that might otherwise have gone to Al Gore.

To start running for president, one has to form an exploratory committee to see if running is viable. One must develop a strategy here to help win power. There are two general types of candidates: insiders and outsiders. Outsiders cast themselves as uncorrupted by Washington-politics-as-usual, whereas insiders often showcase their experience. You should show that you know how to "get things done." You might also run as your own person, but this never works.



Next, a candidate must ask how to defeat one's opponents, and this involves using labels and getting people to think of your opponent in the terms that are most conducive to your election. Next follows the primary, which allows parties to choose their preferred candidates. Next, the candidate must meet constituents and make stump speeches, the speech that contains one's general campaign themes and are constantly repeated. You seek endorsements from popular organizations and often engage in debates. But advertising is perhaps most crucial.

Finally comes Election Day and getting people to the polls. Few elections have been disputed despite the high incentive to cheat, which is surprising. If you lose, you thank your staffers, and if you win, you celebrate and give your campaign workers jobs. Then you are in office and begin real work.



## Chapter 7, The Media, Democracy's Guardian Angel

The free press is required for a functioning democracy. It informs the public on relevant issues that help it promote the common good. They have stopped doing this. Instead, they focus on far more trivial issues. The media should provide context, access and insight, monitor the government and determine who is helping the people and who is hurting it. The aim is transparency, giving citizens the truth. The press has surpassed the status imagined by the Founding Fathers. It is now an entertainment system.

The media was most important in the American Revolution. But then the only forms of media were the town crier and the pamphlet. The town crier delivered immediate messages and the pamphlet encouraged detailed thinking about an issue. For instance, the most famous pamphleteer of the revolutionary days was Thomas Paine, who wrote *Common Sense*, which is widely thought to have inspired the young to fight the revolution. The Founding Fathers were so happy with the media that they passed the First Amendment which protected free speech and freedom of the press.

The next form of media was the newspaper, a bundle of opinions and news delivered to the door. There were also tabloids which contained sensationalist news, and in 1898 sent the country to war with Spain based on false information. This was "yellow journalism."

Mass production of newspapers united and informed the people, but radio followed on its heels, producing an even faster form of communication. People could know what was going on without reading. Radio changed democracy by making news available twenty-four hours a day and created a national news audience for the first time. It also generated corporate sponsorship for advertising. This often biased broadcasting messages.

TV followed radio and made it easier still to learn without thinking as visual and audio information was presented for passive observation. TV became the dominant medium of the twentieth century, taking over newspapers, radio, and film. Further, no one ugly would ever take part in civic life again, signaled by Nixon's 1960 loss to John Kennedy perhaps due to Kennedy's more handsome looks in their debate. Watergate was one of the first major scandals that were brought to television, although it was exposed by two reporters for the *Washington Post*. Richard Nixon was ultimately forced to resign.

Modern media are beginning to be deeply influenced by the internet, although television thrives. The internet can turn anonymous hearsay into national news. But media has come to be dominated by corporate ownership, constraining debate and leading to media control by the rich and powerful. This also brought government and media together, as both were controlled by the rich and powerful. The public never knows what government is up to and the media can focus on the sensational. When disputes arise, the parties provide the media with talking points and generate pundits that represent

these talking points on television debate shows. But the press has never been freer. Since it has no investigative element, it can focus on raising the stock prices of media empires the own them.



## Chapter 8, The Future of Democracy, Four Score and Seven Years from Now

The American experiment has exceeded the Founding Fathers' expectations. Most thought the Union would last no more than thirty to fifty years. Instead, the United States has consistently grown and expanded. The question Stewart asks the reader to ask herself is whether the growth will continue. But speculating is difficult. Nonetheless, Stewart proposes to bring the reader the absolute truth.

In the first version of the future, America's reliance on technology substantially reduces our fundamental humanity. Democracy will not be able to combat the tools we've created. Power will be centralized in the hands of the few. Instead, future elections will probably involve learning about candidates through neutrally inserted chips, the information which will be set by a variety of powerful institutions. This will lead to voting for horrific legislation. High-tech methods of withdrawing opinion will be developed as well.

Technology will also isolate us in ways we can't imagine. Scattered pockets of religious people will exist here and there, but American will only be a name on a swampier map. National greatness will cease.

The second version of the future realizes our worst fears about America's rapidly shifting demography which will overload federal infrastructure. Latinos flood the country and the national language becomes bilingual. Anglos will fight back with white flight and using the law. New States will be created to run Congress, such as "Orange County" and "Texas II." But it won't matter. Bloated federal bureaucracies will fall apart from being able to accommodate a growing underclass. Social services will largely cease to exist.

The third version of democracy sees Jesus Christ returning and separating the worthy from the damned. After the shout of the Archangel is heard, the living and dead in Jesus will reign with God for one thousand years. Then the Democrats will regain the House and the Senate.

In the fourth version, the future of democracy is not hard to imagine. Democracy will continue and will balance lofty ideals with fallibility. The United States will not be the globe's only superpower because we won't have enough people. At some point, someone will be richer and stronger. China and India are good contenders.





## Chapter 9, The Rest of the World, International House of Horrors

Chapter nine is the last of the book. But the book's more astute readers will have noticed that in the list of institutions that make up the government and the critiques of them, there has been no mention of the rest of the world. Most Americans have not seen the rest of the world anyway since we are in love with xenophobia and recent travel bans. Thus, Stewart reproduces various facts about the rest of the world, its peoples, systems of government, etc.

First Africa is examined. It is currently is the place of war, disease, corruption, repression and poverty. But Africa was not always so bad. In fact, Africa's present difficulties can be laid at the feet of foreign white oppressors and local black oppressors. Africa's only hope for democracy is continent-wide improvements in education, human rights, public health and so on.

Australia comes next; there are various similarities between Australia and the US, including language and slaughter of the indigenous population. However, it has various unique animals. It also has a "Canada" known as New Zealand. China comes next; it has a population of 1.3 billion. Its economy lags behind other industrialized nations, but it is a sleeping giant and a police state.

Old Europe is discussed as well and has a population of 350 million, and no region's stature has fallen more in the past 100 years than this area which once ruled the world. They were tired, though. Japan follows and has a population of some 127 million. Stewart lists various humorous parodies of their national sport, transportation, etc.

Latin America has a population of 500 million and has had a difficult time suffering through imperialism but is much better off than Africa. Stewart lists various important cities in Mexico and then moves to Central America, which is full of oppressive dictatorships. The Middle East comes next, with 200 million. The history of this area is well-documented and goes back very far.

Russia and Eastern Europe have numerous civil wars and 300 million people. The Soviet Union, which once controlled the entire area, has collapsed. Scandinavia has 24 million people and has the political model most admired by the American Left. The region was once brutal but is currently quite peaceful.

Southern Asia is the last region to be covered. It has a constantly increasing population and contains a "unique mix of paradise and hell." There is a wide range of condition of life in the area. Some have capitalist, modernizing economies, but others are incredibly poor. There are few democracies. Finally, Stewart ends the book by congratulating the reader and declaring him able to found his own democracy. Unfortunately, there are no new lands to do so. However, one might help those here who are desperate, broken and helpless.

# Important People

## Jon Stewart

Jonathan Stewart (1962) is a well-known American comedian, writer, actor and host of the satirical news show *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central. Stewart is the main author of *America (The Book)* who began his career as a stand-up comedian and then got into television. After starting to host *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central in 1999, he earned an Emmy for the show two years later. He has been widely praised for his biting left-wing news commentary and his criticisms of the mainstream media and has been nominated for a variety of journalism awards. Consequently, *America (The Book)* was among the best selling books in 2004.

*America (The Book)* was somewhat controversial when it appears because it depicted the then current Supreme Court Justices as naked, but otherwise it was comprised of the standard forms of political satire that are typical of the show. The book seems to somewhat reflect Stewart's perspective, which is intent on mocking all aspects of American political life but leaving significant room for substantial criticism of the way that American political institutions function.

For instance, Stewart has been a long-time critic of the American media for failing to properly inform the American public about the issues of the day. And in an October 15th, 2004 visit to the then popular CNN pundit show *Crossfire*, he became well-known for pointing this criticism directly at then hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala. This criticism is continued and reasonably well-developed in the book, despite its intended popular and comedic appeal.

## The Daily Show Affiliates

*America (The Book)* has two other main authors, Ben Karlin and David Javerbaum, along with other writers of *The Daily Show*. Karlin was the show's executive producer and Javerbaum its main writer. Their perspectives are reflected in the book, but the show is better known for its famous correspondents, many of whom have gone on to become famous in their own right (in particular, Steve Carrell and Stephen Colbert). Three of *The Daily Show* affiliate reports make contributions to the book, Ed Helms, Samantha Bee and Stephen Colbert.

Ed Helms is an American actor and comedian who became more widely known for his role in *The Office*. He began work as a correspondent for *The Daily Show* in 2002 and left in mid-2006 but hosted several regular segments in the meanwhile. He returned to the show in 2007. In the book, Helms's articles describe what he would do if given a position of power, and he usually points out that someone would die as a result and for unrevealed reasons.



Samantha Bee is a Canadian Actress and comedian who joined The Daily Show cast in 2005. She is well-known for her ability to persuade and manipulate people into caricaturing themselves. In the book, she prominently features her Canadian citizenship portraying herself and Canada as a meek, "friendly neighbor-to-the-north" in articles giving friendly facts about Canadian political institutions.

The third contributor, Stephen Colbert, joined The Daily Show in 1997 and played an increasingly prominent role until 2005 when he left to host The Colbert Report, which quickly achieved similar status to The Daily Show. In America (The Book), Colbert contributes a variety of short articles expressing inappropriately strong and negative opinions about various people or issues, including his intense hatred for President Warren G. Harding.

## **Thomas Jefferson**

The third president of the United States and the (putative) author of the foreword.

## **George W. Bush**

The 43rd president of the United States, president at the time of the publication of America (The Book).

## **John F. Kennedy**

The oft-romanticized, assassinated mid-twentieth century president who is mentioned from time to time in the book.

## **Pundits**

Media commentators who have (in the book's view) a duty to promote respectful and informative dialogue but fail utterly in this.

## **Lobbyists**

Representatives of special interest groups that (in the book's view) have an inordinate influence on the legislative process.

## **Reporters**

Media representatives whose job it is to impartially report on matters relevant to the lives and well-being of the American people, but again, who utterly fail in this.



## **Legislators**

The members of Congress who are supposed to make laws in the common interest, but do not.

## **The President**

The leader of the executive branch of the United States' government whose power (in the book's view) has expanded much too far.

## **Supreme Court Justices**

The heads of the judicial branch who, again, in the book's view, have too much power for unelected officials.

## **Homosexuals**

A bug-o-bear of the right often mentioned to make fun of conservative political concerns.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The United States of America**

The country of concern in the book.

### **The Enlightenment**

The period of eighteenth century thought that emphasized the power of reason and science in coming to understand and control the world. The book praises this period.

### **The Pre-Revolutionary Period**

The periods of time preceding the founding of American discussed in chapters one and two of the book.

### **The Constitution**

The political document that was ratified in 1789 and continues to govern the United States today.

### **The Executive Branch**

The branch of government responsible for executing the law.

### **The Legislative Branch**

The branch of government responsible for legislation.

### **The Judicial Branch**

The branch of government responsible for interpreting the Constitution.

### **Campaigns and Elections**

The American process of choosing new politicians and administrations.

## **The Media**

That part of the public sphere responsible for reporting accurate information to the public.

## **Political Parties**

Representatives of ideologies and groups of politicians that help candidates run for and achieve office.

## **Study Guides**

America (The Book) is replete with study guides, mocking the structure of standard American Civics textbooks.

## **Jokes/Deliberate Inaccuracies**

America (The Book) is also full of jokes and deliberate inaccuracies intended for comic effect.

# Themes

## Satire

America (The Book) is quite obviously a book of satire. It is written by the host and writers of one of the most popular comedy television shows in the country, The Daily Show, and would not be appropriate to the show unless it was filled with the sort of satire that the show regularly delivers to viewers. However, America (The Book) aims at a certain sort of satire, characteristic of its unique location in the American public sphere. The Daily Show is a "fake news" show that mocks the news and those who report it. However, it is among one of the most trusted sources of news in part because it wears its bias on its sleeves and has the culture's permission to make claims about the state of American politics that bona fide news shows do not.

As a result, many find The Daily Show's interviews and commentaries more forthright, insightful and informative than many genuine news shows. The book's aim is to preserve this balance of satire, comedy and truth-telling. The book certainly leans left, as does the show, but in 2004 the show had a much better reputation for being even-handed and the book somewhat reflects this.

The book satirizes all aspects of American political life and institutions. It starts off with an absurd retelling of world history prior to the founding of America full of the sorts of generalizations and misrepresentations common amongst Americans. The second chapter describes the founding of America with some reverence but with numerous jokes about the horrific slaughter of the American Indians and the enslavement of American blacks.

## The Failure of Political Institutions

America (The Book) is a biting work of political satire as delivered by one of the early twenty-first century's foremost satirical outlets, The Daily Show, its host and its writers and contributors. The Daily Show typically mocks American news and political institutions. However, in the book, it goes deeper and describes not only the structure and supposed function of American government and its branches but its common dysfunctions as well.

The book covers all three branches of government in detail and accurately explains their original and intended mechanisms of operation. However, the book also points out how the branches have extended their power and how they have become corrupt in various ways. For instance, the office of the presidency is explained as originally having extremely limited power but today having power that would horrify the Founding Fathers of the country.

The legislative branch is mocked for its excessively convoluted structure, despite the book taking pains to describe its structure accurately. The book also outlines the



process by which a bill is passed but not only describes how the process is supposed to work but how it actually works, including how Congressmen rarely pass bills in the public interests and how they permit lobbyists to alter the structure of bills before they become law.

Finally, the book discusses the judicial branch and charges the judges with being primarily ideologues who seek to impose their values and visions of social life on an unwilling and unsuspecting populace. The descriptions of these three branches make a striking accusation that American political institutions reliably fail to function as they were intended, and that by failing, they fail to promote the common good.

## **The Failure of Political Culture**

The three branches of government are not the only public institutions that come in for criticism in America (The Book). The book focuses on two other aspects of American political life: campaigns and elections and the media.

Campaigns and elections are described in biting terms. Originally meant to be limited and to inform actively engaged citizens of who the best candidate was, today's campaigns are more work than governing and far more expensive. Campaign machines are vast and powerful, constantly crafting media images of their candidates in order to prompt passive and uninformed voters to go to the polls. The book approaches campaigns with significant criticism when it claims that the qualities that make for good candidates make for terrible elected officials and that, as a result, ineffective and corrupt politicians end up in high office.

The media comes in for even harsher criticism. America (The Book) is published by a satirical news outlet, but it has strong and incisive opinions about the functioning of the American media. The point of the media is to inform the public about how their political institutions are functioning and about the facts on the issues of the day. It should also provide thoughtful, critical commentary about those facts and issues. However, the American media utterly fails in part because it is dominated by enormous media conglomerates that aim only at profit and consequently promote sensationalism over effective journalism and commentary. Together, the criticisms of both parts of political culture make the argument that American political culture has significant shortcomings.





# Style

## Style

### Perspective

The perspective of America (The Book) is that of its writers, the host and writers of The Daily Show circa 2004, a satirical left-leaning "fake news" shows that remains among the most popular sources for American news and opinion in the entire United States. The show is hosted by Jon Stewart, a long-time stand-up comedian and television personality whose prominence has increased consistently since starting to host The Daily Show in 1999.

The show aims at satire and so does the book. Consequently, the book is full of humor, bawdy jokes, puns, and is constructed so as to parody the structure of American high school civics books. It also contains a great deal of humor that some book sellers deemed over the line, such as the photo-shopped depictions of the then current Supreme Court justices naked. The book also is true to the show by doing its best to convey well-packaged but factually accurate information about the structure of American political institutions and political culture.

However, the book, like the show, clearly lands in the left-liberal category. It is not particularly far-left, and displays little hostility to the workings of the private market. However, it is sharply critical and unsympathetic to cultural conservatism and the deep religiosity of some of the American people. Further, it is critical of American foreign policy in 2004 and gives off a distinctively anti-war vibe. Finally, it emphasizes many of the failings of American government in ways uncharacteristic of the American right, such as the death of the American Indians.

### Tone

The tone of America (The Book) substantially reflects its perspective. The tone is acerbic, bawdy, satirical, incisive, honest and light-hearted. First, the tone has an acerbic element because it takes very little seriously and treats those figures and institutions it regards as corrupt with great disdain. It will often intersperse jokes with harsh claims about important political figures or issues and never fails to remind the reader of the dark side of American history.

Understandably for a book written by the staff of a comedy "fake news" show, the book is full of bawdy humor. It is not merely a work of comedy, but contains numerous jokes about flatulence, sexuality, homosexuality, and other matters that many would consider puerile and others delightful. It is also bawdy in its crude descriptions of many important historical figures and events. Third, the tone is obviously satirical because it is a straightforward work of satire. In particular, it aims to satirize American political life and institutions and so its satire has a distinctively American feel.



The book is also honest. First, it will often pause and reflect honestly on itself, on the silly nature of the book and on its own failings. Second, it ably conveys the structure of American political institutions to the reader and does its best to describe not only their intended functions but their actual functions as well. Finally, the book is light-hearted. In the end, after all the jokes, the book has a clear appreciation for how good things are in the United States; this is particular clear in the tone of the final chapter, which describes how much worse conditions are in most other countries.

## Structure

America (The Book) is modeled after an American high school civics textbook. Thus, it contains a study guide, various content questions following each chapter, a variety of pictures and "did you know?" captions. It also reproduces quotes from many important historical figures, although all of these features are full of jokes and inaccuracies. The book contains a full-blown study guide at the beginning, along with a certificate of completion, and a brief foreword and afterward. However, the substance of the text is its nine chapters.

Chapter one, "Democracy before America," covers world history as it led up to the formation and founding of the United States. Starting with prehistoric times, it zooms through several thousand years of history. Chapter two, "The Founding of America," reviews the important political events that led to the American Founding, including the American Revolution and the Constitutional Convention.

Chapter three, "The President: King of Democracy," explains how the office of the presidency is supposed to work and how it has evolved over time. Chapter four, "Congress: Quagmire of Freedom," does the same thing for the workings of the two houses of Congress. Chapter five, "The Judicial Branch: It rules," reviews similar facts about the structure and workings of the judicial branch and primarily discusses the Supreme Court.

Chapter six, "Campaigns and Elections: America Changes the Sheets," outlines the nature of American elections and campaigns, whereas Chapter seven, "The Media: Democracy's Guardian Angels," discusses how the American media functions and fails to function. Chapter eight, "The Future of Democracy: Four Score and Seven Years from Now," paints possible futures for American democracy, and Chapter nine, "The Rest of the World: International House of Horrors" presents information on the political institutions in other parts of the world.



## Quotes

"It is often said that America 'invented' democracy. This view is, of course, an understatement; America invented not only democracy, but freedom, justice, liberty, and 'time-sharing.'" Chap. 1, p. 1

"Democracy needed a fresh start - heart and idealistic champions who would strike out for a new world, willing to risk everything for the principles of equality, liberty, justice ... and slaves. We'd need some slaves and guns. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. A new world awaited." Chap. 1, p. 11

"The Declaration of Independence was signed and announced on July 4th, 1776. A new nation was born. The Founding Fathers could now retire back to their respective states, knowing that all that was left to achieve was for their untrained militias to engage and defeat the most powerful empire the world had ever seen." Chap. 2, p. 27

"The Founders prayed only that this Constitution be ratified, respected and upheld ... and that nobody would tell the black people about it." Chap. 2, p. 30

"Though the president is very powerful, he cannot make laws." Chap. 3, p. 45

"The history of the presidency is a history of growth and expansion directly mirroring that of the United States itself. ... Like it or not, more so than any other figure in our nation, the president embodies America. And one day, you could be him. ... But not really." Chap. 3, p. 50

"Some [Congressmen] are moved by the words of the late John F. Kennedy, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.' Others are inspired by the amount of tail that kind of talk used to get the late president. Still others entertain Mephistophelian visions of unlimited power over the affairs of men." Chap. 4, p. 77

"These nine wise men and women, guided only by their consciences, their study of the law, their political affiliations, their obedience to the president who appointed them, their personal distaste for the litigants before them, their accumulated lifetimes of prejudices and preferences, mood swings, affections and animosities toward their fellow justices, and—of course—the occasional coin toss, make fundamental changes to the function and interpretation of the Constitution. The matter that has come before them is settled for good." Chap. 5, p. 100

"Nixon's subsequent triumph was proof of the system's central tenet: Campaigns and elections are the process in which democracy separates the willing from the able ... and goes with the willing." Chap. 6, p. 104



"The resulting war raised circulation for both men, and the pair's blend of fiction, bigotry and jingoism became known as yellow journalism. Later, the phrase was shortened to 'journalism'." Chap. 7, p. 140

"By removing the investigative aspect of investigative journalism, today's modern media finally has the time to pursue the ultimate goal the Founding Fathers envisioned for newsgathering organizations: To raise the stock price of the media empire that owns them." Chap. 7, p. 154

"Meanwhile, outnumbered, outvoted and outcast, America's Caucasian population will be reduced to a disempowered army of day laborers wandering the dusty southwest looking for menial jobs. In perhaps the greatest irony of all, they will fail to see the irony of all this." Chap. 8, p. 176

"The good news is, many of the existing lands out there are fixer-uppers, filled with willing, desperate, broken and hopeless people. You might even be one yourself. And if you are, representative democracy, for all its flaws, still offers you and your fellow cold and huddled masses the best chance of improving your lot in life. ... Now go out there and make your Fathers proud." Chap. 9, p. 220



## Topics for Discussion

America (The Book) is an explicitly comedic book but contains real-world political commentary. Do you think its satirical style helps to illustrate its serious points more effectively?

To what extent is America (The Book)'s description of American political institutions accurate? Is it easy enough to separate the true claims about the institutions from the jokes?

How even handed is the book? Do you think it leans towards one end of the political spectrum? If so, what end? And how do you identify this?

To what extent is the book's description of the influence of money in elections and lobbyists and pork in the legislative process accurate? In fact, what is the description? Explain in detail.

Explain in detail the book's conception of the proper role of the press in a free and democratic society. Why is the book's criticism of how the media actually functions?

Explain the book's view on the evolution of the presidency and its powers. Do you think the book is criticizing the powers acquired by the president? What is the criticism?

The book makes several silly predictions about the future of American democracy. What are they? What real-world trends make these predictions reflect something true about American society today?