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Book Review by Patrick Brown **Democracy Versus Television**

Democracy, says Al Gore, has not survived television. This is the same Al Gore who has so successfully used film and television to tell the world about global climate change. But he's chosen to write a book, *The Assault on Reason*, to make his case. (Among other things, this book explains why it's a book and not a movie—you can't explain the reason for reason on the screen.)

This is also the Al Gore who might well have been President of the United States for the past seven years (imagine that). But this book is not about voting fraud. It does devote some scathing chapters to the record of the Bush II administration, but it's not really about that either.

It is about how politics are conducted in the US today, and how television has changed America from a nation of reasoned consideration to a nation blinded by fear and manipulated through the control of information and the distortion of the political system.

The framers of the US Constitution, says Gore, anticipated the growth of a nation which was literate, capable of reasoning, and whose citizens would take the time to become informed on the issues of the day and express their opinions through the political system. America's 'founding fathers' also expected that the people's congressional representatives and their president would hear those opinions and act in accordance with them.

In fact, they counted on two-way communication, allowing for discussion, debate, and the true expression of what these few men (and they were nearly all men, wealthy for their time) who designed the US political system believed would be the combined wisdom of the people.

Communication in those days depended on the written word; the crafting of pamphlets and the production of newspapers shaped the media landscape. These documents took time to write and took time to read, and demanded of both the writer and the reader that they present reasoned argument. Pure polemic—and there was much—could be recognized, if not on first reading, then on the second.

Radio did not change this much (Marshall McLuhan can explain why). But television has, for several reasons. It is a one-way medium—you may shout back at the images on your

screen, but nobody's listening. Secondly, those images appeal to the emotions more than to reason—Gore, who seeks the roots of an argument, tells us why the brain works that way, and why television images shortcut our thinking. Third, television costs money: this leads not only to the control of the TV media by a few large corporations, but also to the need for large amounts of money by those politicians who wish to reach the voter.

The media corporations, of course, find it convenient to ensure that the government is aligned with their interests; and the government, wishing to ensure that its message gets out, find the same alignment convenient.

The politicians find it easiest to raise money not from their citizen constituents, but from organizations and corporations which, to put it kindly, do not necessarily represent the wisdom of the people.

Meanwhile, the written word receives less and less attention. Newspapers, which depend on advertising revenues, lose to voracious television. Few people read; most watch TV many hours a day.

For the moneyed and powerful with their own agenda, whether they seek more money or more power, or both, this is a fertile field for growing their interests. The system propagates lies just as well as truth; corporate media organizations with their own interests have their own messages to add.

A bleak outlook. But Gore is not a man to give up in the face of overwhelming odds, as we have seen. His hope lies with the internet, and he is quick to warn of politicians and corporations who would seek to control it.

He poses the questions: 'Will we continue to live as a people under the rule of law as embodied in our Constitution? Or will we fail future generations by leaving them a Constitution far diminished from the charter of liberty we have inherited from our forebears?'

The ring of oratory, and the sound of history, are both there, and not only for the United States of America. An essential book.

The Assault on Reason, Al Gore, Penguin, New York, 2007, \$25.95 in the US, \$32.50 in Canada. ☞

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