

*"A Response to The American Lie: Government by the People and Other Political Fables, by Benjamin Ginsberg"*

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I have three main responses to Professor Ginsberg's fine book.

The first is as a longtime but nonetheless amateur observer of and participant in (to a small degree) American politics.

The second is as an alarmed (and still amateur) observer of recent American politics and economics.

The third is as a scholar and teacher of African American Studies.

Response one: I assume most readers of *The American Lie* would agree with me that it is a clear, convincing, detailed debunking of many American political myths and a good overview of "how things really work." Ginsberg writes authoritatively about the roles of money, status, power, and deception in our illusory democracy, and he makes a strong case for cynical realism. Probably more than a few of us who have thought of ourselves as cynical realists for a long time are still vulnerable to bouts of optimism and other kinds of foolishness. *The American Lie* is a good vaccine against such vulnerability. And although it's true that despair, nihilism, over-medication, and/or self-exile all seem as appropriate as cynical realism at times, the latter remains an advisable vantage point.

That said, my second response to *The American Lie* was nostalgic. It made me long for an era when the American political and economic systems were merely corrupt; when politicians were only self-serving, narcissistic, oligarchic, adulterous, drunk, bought-off, and hypocritical.

It's not that I long for a Golden Age that never existed. As poet Randall Jarrell once observed, "In the Golden Age, everybody probably went around complaining how yellow everything was." It's that American politics and economics seem, like Voyager, to have left the solar system, soaring far beyond the boundaries on which a cynical realist used to be able, more or less, to rely. In other words, through no fault of its own, cynical realism doesn't seem up to the task of understanding American politics and economics.

Let me hasten to add that I think cynical realism and Professor Ginsberg's book remain pertinent to understanding most politicians from the Democratic Party, which is a self-serving, manipulative, power-grabbing, and feckless institution; in other words, the Democratic Party is old school. Very little that it does (and it does very little) will surprise a cynical realist.

But then there is the Republican Party. (And there is "Wall Street.")

Until relatively recently, I was accustomed to thinking of a one-party system in which Republicans and Democrats pretended to disagree so as to maintain the distracting political spectacle about which Murray Edelman wrote so well. I was also accustomed to thinking that, more or less, the same propaganda, as defined by Jacques Ellul, flowed from both parties in roughly the same quantity and at roughly the same velocity.

Then something changed. I cannot say exactly when it changed. We could go back to McCarthy, but I think that's too far. –Or to Goldwater, but now Barry seems reasonable by contrast. To Nixon? Okay, he was a nut, but in retrospect, he seems like an amateur, and most of his views would be considered liberal now. Reagan, Iran-Contra, and all that? Maybe. George W. Bush? Certainly.

In any event, the old schemes of Republican/Democrat, conservative/liberal, and right/center/left simply don't seem to obtain.

For, based on these old schemes, here is what we're faced with:

If you accept the science of global warming, you are "liberal." This is like saying that if you accept the fact that you will die if you step in front of a speeding bus, you are "liberal."

If you looked at the ballot last year and thought that Barack Obama was preferable to Mitt Romney, you are "liberal." Assume that you need a new car but that you have a choice between only two cars: one seems to run well enough to get off the lot, at least. The other has

been smashed and flattened at a junk-yard. If you chose the one that could at least get off the lot, you're a "liberal."

If you rather like the idea of a U.S. Post Office, you are a "liberal." My father, a staunch Republican, very much liked the U.S. Post Office. Those days are gone. Republicans want to kill the Post Office.

If you're alarmed at the accelerating accumulation of wealth in possession of a small percentage of Americans and at the large percentage of Americans who struggle mightily, you are "liberal." Arguably, the U.S. is rapidly moving to an era in which there is a very wealthy class and then "the rest," in which "working class" and middle class" have no particular meaning.

Moreover, the truth is that President Obama, on most issues, is no further "left" than Dwight Eisenhower was. (Whereas Eisenhower warned of the consequences of a military-industrial complex, Obama plays with the complex like a kid with a new video game. "Wow, look—drones! How cool is that?")

Katrina vanden Heuvel likes to say that the Republican Party has dragged "the center" so far right that the Democratic Party is now the old Republican Party because it is inept and must follow the leader. There is no doubt some truth in that (although I will defer to the views of others on this panel). But I also think that, as noted, the left/centrist/right scheme isn't helpful. In truth, Republicans haven't gone further Right. They've exploded and gone in all sorts of directions. They are so anti-Establishment, in fact, that they make the Weather Underground look like the Rotary Club.

That is, they can't even speak intelligently about opposing abortion. They must speak, it seems, as if they are experimenting with awful drugs, not to mention with women's bodies. They can't simply oppose Obama. They must "break him," as slave masters broke slaves; it is the same rhetoric. They must insist he's not American. They can't simply argue for "limited government"; they must incinerate government. They have to depict almost 50% of Americans as little more than pan-handlers. With complete irrationality, they

must, even after what happened in 2007, oppose “gub-ment regulation.” Precisely when the economy shows signs of recovery—which translates into jobs for ordinary folk—they must refuse to make a reasonable budget-deal. In sum, they must make *every* issue a false crisis. This is why I long for the days of old-school corruption, which a cynical realist could understand; a Congressperson’s obligation was to make a deal, and to make one that favored his or her state or district or both—leading inexorably to re-election. Pork was everywhere on the political menu. A Republican Congressperson’s obligation now seems to be to wreck the process, *even if* it costs the district or the state economically. Astonishingly, Republicans seem allergic even to pork.

And in the meantime, as noted, wealth in the U.S. flows toward the top in ways that seem nearly unprecedented. At the same time, banks, brokerages, energy-companies, and media-ownership appears to be ever-more consolidated and above or beyond accountability.

If you’re inclined to agree with these views, then you can no doubt fill in more details, and more effective details, than I have provided.

My over-arching question in relation to *The American Lie*, however, is this: is cynical realism (again, through no fault of its own) cynical and realistic enough to grasp (let alone help to alter) what has happened lately? If all we had to contend with was *The American Lie*, I’d view the scene sanguinely, but now, it seems, we have to deal with the American self-immolation, on a variety of fronts.

Finally, from a vantage-point of African American Studies [response three], one might be inclined to change the sub-title of *The American Lie* from “Government by the People and Other Political Fables” to “All People Are Treated As People and Other Outlandish Assumptions.” From centuries of slavery through Jim Crow, and from Jim Crow to the present, African Americans’ views of American dishonesty, hypocrisy, and sociopathy are, of necessity, unique and more than cynically realistic.

In chapter three, Professor Ginsberg writes, “For example, almost everyone has some measure of identification with others with whom they share an ethnic background or gender. But there is no inherent reason why ethnicity and gender should be politically important when other traits such as, say, height, intelligence, or even hair color should have less political significance. The political importance of a given characteristic depends upon consciousness and leadership, not destiny” (115).

Combining cynical realism with knowledge of American history, one is compelled to conclude that there is every reason why ethnicity and gender must be more politically important than these other traits and that while being Black (for example) isn’t literally destiny, the way American politics, law, and economics operate means that ethnicity significantly determines destiny. As Michelle Alexander has persuasively argued in *The New Jim Crow*, being Black still determines the reality African Americans have to negotiate with regard to the justice system, economics, and sheer survival.

And it’s probably true that the behavior of Mitch McConnell, Jim Demint, Joe Walsh, Michelle Bachmann, and Tea Party activists (for example) cannot fully be explained within the confines of customary American lies and have to be understood, in part, with reference to the President’s race. Similarly, the President’s political calculations, to some degree, have to be “read” with some consideration of his decision not to appear to be “too Black” or to govern with too much attention to the plight of African Americans. And at even a more basic level, how many Black families in the U.S. can afford *not* to have the conversation with their sons and daughters about how their sons and daughters will likely be treated by most police officers, many teachers, and so on?

Indeed, Professor Ginsberg himself anticipates such factors when he concludes the paragraph as follows: “Blacks and white in the United States could hardly be unaware of the historic differences that made America’s racial divide, at times, seem unbridgeable.” I’d add only that major white supremacist players in American politics and justice (McConnell, Scalia) have no desire to bridge the divide.

Thanks to Professor Ginsberg for writing this book. I long for the day when cynical realism is sufficiently cynical and realistic to match what seems to be happening in the U.S.A.

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