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Political Science

American Vulgar: The Politics of Manipulation versus the Culture of Awareness
Robert Grudin
Counterpoint
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This author takes aim at everyone—the Bush administration, the everyday Americans who elected him, the corporate honchos, the media establishment, and academics. He puts America under a cultural microscope; and he does not like what he sees. But Grudin's not merely a sage chronicler of vulgar times. Rather, he examines American culture and provides a breathtaking and insightful historical and philosophical interpretation of vulgarity.

Grudin's preface lays the groundwork immediately by outlining how "A War and a Killing" exemplify American vulgarity. He examines how these two events were presented, how the media and related corporations capitalized on the fascination and voyeurism, and how Americans have doomed themselves to more of the same by being so predictably lucrative. And, he succinctly defines his most important operating ideas. As Grudin sees it, vulgarity is not simply any crude or coarse action; rather, "an action is vulgar when it is at once ignorant, harmful, and popular." And, the opposite of vulgarity is "consciousness," which he describes as "the ability to be alert to important things and literate in them."

Grudin is well prepared for an exposition on American politics and culture. A professor of English until 1998 at the University of Oregon, he has published widely in scholarly circles, and has written essays and commentaries for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. He is the author of a trilogy of philosophy books, including *The Grace of Great Things*, and recently released a novel titled *Book, A Novel*. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1992—93 and is the author of the Encyclopedia Britannica's entry on "Humanities."

While Grudin is tough in examining many facets of American vulgarity, he is especially hard on today's politics, and points to the current administration of George W. Bush with frequency. Grudin does not ignore the complacency of the American public in this vulgar mix, either: "As Americans are free to elect their governments and express their views, so too are they free to indulge their own ignorance and enrich the clowns, quacks, and hucksters who help

them do so."

Grudin's thoughts on liberal education are especially well considered and as such are compelling reading not just for academics, but for anyone concerned with the educational system in America. His idea of forming a national "Task Force in the Humanities" is thought-provoking for both the political junkie and the educationally-minded reader.

American Vulgar is a timely look at the effects of vulgarity on American society and provides a stimulating roadmap for recognizing and cultivating social consciousness as an antidote to vulgarity's demeaning and dangerous effects.

Chris Arvidson