



## The Dictionary of American Political Bullshit

**Stephen L. Goldstein**

Grid Press (Apr 15, 2014)

Softcover \$18.95 (226pp)

978-1-55571-768-1

*Serious observations paired with a cynical voice call out the “bullshit” in politics.*

On the first reading of *The Dictionary of American Political Bullshit* by Stephen L. Goldstein, one might be tempted to include this very book in the lexicon of other political phrases, words, and short statements designated by the author as misleading, vapid, or otherwise useless. But just in the nick of time, the author manages to justify his opus. It reads like a 1920s silent film melodrama with poor Penelope (i.e., the American people) rescued at the last moment from the speeding locomotive (i.e., present day politicians) by the guys in the white hats (i.e., rational thought).

The book is organized like a dictionary, with entries arranged alphabetically and with each entry including a definition. The definitions are actually short essays, each about two pages in length, discussing the real underlying meaning of the word or phrase. Thus, the author covers matters beginning with “access” and ending with “world-class.” Each entry is denominated as bullshit, and Goldstein explains why he has so categorized the word or phrase. Some explanations include humorous material; most can be classified as cynical.

It would be easy to dismiss this book as put together by a jaded political junkie who is frustrated with the current level of what passes as political discourse. Early on, it becomes clear that Goldstein’s definition of bullshit includes most conservative proposals concerning public issues. Rarely is that appellation applied to more progressive positions, but it does happen often enough to keep the author honest.

A closer reading uncovers serious, provocative observations that add to the quality of political debate. Discussing the Citizens United case, which opened the floodgates to corporate financing of elections, the author looks forward to a day when the people will take matters into their own hands, as they should in a representative democracy: “But that will take major lapses into rationality: that only people are people, only speech is speech—and, like it or not, corporations are only corporations.”

Under the entry for “government,” Goldstein notes that the antigovernment ranting that has beset us for many years began with during the Reagan administration. Rather than dismiss this penchant for mouthing platitudes about the evils stemming from Reagan’s time as president, a favorite pastime of the left, Goldstein cuts to the substance of the issue: “What’s worse, anti-government rhetoric, now taken for granted, continues to be the justification for dismantling our social fabric.” Thus, substance triumphs over form.

Goldstein wraps up his diatribe with an epilogue aimed at the pervasiveness of the Internet. Curiously, he says that what is said on the Internet lasts forever: “But ultimately this is the Age of Accountability. The Internet will lead to the death of bullshit.” If that is true, then we don’t need *The Dictionary of American Political Bullshit*; all we need is patience. Or is this book bullshit too? Read it and decide.

JOHN SENGER (June 17, 2014)

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