

Political Booknotes

Fraud.com

By Paul Taylor

ANYONE WHO HAS EVER GOTTEN a piece of direct mail from a politician or issue group is familiar with the writing style. Enemies are ominous! Ruination is imminent! Sentences are punchy! It's a rhetorical never-never land where the exclamation point is king and nuance an outcast.

As I labored through Dick Morris' strange and fraudulent book, I kept thinking about that mode of discourse, for the political future he conjures up in cyberspace feels like a corner of hell where all the direct mail keeps being recirculated.

In Morris' overheated imaginings, candidates will soon be communicating to voters one-at-a-time in a stream of targeted emails and videos that trip through cyberspace cost-free. If it sounds like a killer app for personalized political pander, that's probably why the author—who's spent his career helping politicians perfect the art form—finds it appealing. But to anyone who thinks that campaigns ought to play out in the biggest public square, precisely so they can invite citizens to weigh self-interest against common purpose, it's a scary prospect.

It's by no means the scariest thing Morris sees in his crystal ball, however. That would be his vision of a politics in which citizens use cyberspace to talk back to their elected leaders in a daily stream of referendums. So today we'll all be voting on taxes, tomorrow on abortion, Thursday on war in the Balkans, and Friday (because democracy shouldn't always be such a bore!) on whether Bill and Hillary should split up.

Mind you, these plebiscites won't be government-run. They'll be sponsored by advertiser-supported com-

mercial Websites like—you've probably guessed the punch line—*Vote.com*. That's not just the name of Morris' new book; it's also the name of his new Website. And, so Morris would have us believe, these plebiscites are the tool that will convert our representative system of government into a direct democracy.

"We are about to reclaim the power Jefferson would have given us," the author proclaims, revving up his faux populism at full throttle. "We'll still choose our president and Congress by the old election system, but the influ-

ence the public can bring to bear will make it far less important whom we elect." It will be government by applause meter.

This is a very old and very bad idea. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato observed the first stirrings of democracy in Athens and worried that leaders who rely too much on the approval of the masses would "never tell an unpleasant truth." Since then, history has confirmed time and again that majorities need protection from demagogues, and minorities need protection from majorities.

Happily, by the time our founders reinvented democracy, they were wise enough to construct a republic based not only on Jefferson's passion for individual liberty, but on Madison's understanding of the need for constitutional space between leaders and followers.

Morris is no Jeffersonian. He just plays one on his book jacket, the better to hustle his Website. If you stay with the book all the way to page 168 (and I don't recommend it), you discover he, too, has a dim view of direct democracy.

"Fifteen years from now," he writes, "as the evidences mounts that people have made the wrong choices and voted their fears and hates more than their hopes and dreams, we will

collectively come to realize the need to curb ourselves and bring back the system of checks and balances so basic to our Constitution.... Like the French Revolutionaries seizing power in 1789, [the people] will take their revenge on those who have listened to them so little in the past before they relinquish, on sober second thought, the power the Internet will give them."

So let's get this straight. First the people storm the ramparts and seize power. Then they do a bunch of stupid things. Then they mysteriously smarten up. Then they give power back. And the trigger for this wild 15-year cycle is not war or famine or fundamentalism or tyranny or depression. It's the Internet. And Morris owns the Website where the revolution's gonna happen, baby. And ad space is still available!

Too bad the book turns out to be such shallow hucksterism, because Morris is on to one of the more intriguing questions of our era: Can the Internet rescue politics?

By cutting the cost of political communication to virtually zero, can it slay the dragon of big money? By providing a cornucopia of information at the click of a mouse, can it topple the 30-second ad? By offering the ease of online voting, can it bring citizens back to politics? By enabling two-way communication between citizen and elected officials, can it reshape the architecture of democracy?

Unlike Morris, I have no crystal ball. I do have a few tentative observations.

If politics can't win the competition for eyeballs in the real world, it's hard to see how it does better in cyberspace. Sure it's easier than ever to get political information online. It's also easier to shop, follow your stocks, do business, play games, and look at dirty pictures. Trying to get political information from the Internet is a little bit like trying to get a drink from a fire hose. Great for junkies; too much for most folks.

Voting keeps getting easier, but voter turnout keeps going down. That's been the history of the past 40 years. The problem isn't mechanics; it's motivation and it's not clear how

VOTE.COM
By Dick Morris
Renaissance Books,
\$22.95

the Internet solves that problem.

The age of two-way communication between voter and leader won't dawn on the Internet because it dawned decades ago—with scientific polling. Elected leaders already know what everyone thinks, all the time. Whatever this will do to our politics has already been done.

Finally, there's so much venture capital floating around that some of it will fund hare-brained schemes that try to make a fast buck on democracy, like Vote.com. But we'll survive. Is America a great country, or what?

PAUL TAYLOR, a former Washington Post political reporter, is founder and executive director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns.

The Frog Factor

By Bill McKibben

THIS IS A REVEALING AND important book, and you should begin by ignoring the subtitle. Something tells me it wasn't the author's choice: In fact, he's done a remarkably sober and meticulous job of following a story that's been misrepresented in almost every newspaper and on every TV station in the country. By book's end, it remains largely unclear what causes frog deformities and exactly how worried we should be about them—but we've instead been treated to a remarkable inside look at science trying to grapple with horribly complicated real-world problems.

In the summer of 1995, eight junior high school students on a field trip discovered a small pond on a Minnesota farm where a great many leopard frogs were missing their hind legs. They called the state government, stories began to appear in the newspapers, and soon Minnesota's environmental agency had a map showing similar reports from almost every county in the state. Other such sites began to show up across the Great Lakes region; a Canadian researcher announced that the same trend was evident in Quebec. What did it all mean? No one knew for sure, because no one knew if deformed frogs were rare, or what might cause the deformities, or if that unknown

agent might harm humans as well. It was a scientific puzzle, and a particularly difficult one. A pond is filled with water; it's hard to break down that water into its thousands of different compounds and figure out if one of them is, in fact, a poison.

And it's here that William Souder, a freelance journalist living in the region where the first frogs were found, really rolls up his sleeves and goes to work. Instead of "covering" the story with a few calls to bureaucrats, he digs in for the long haul, traveling to a long series of small scientific meetings, talking almost daily with the principal investigators, and watching as the science develops.

Though the book is not judgmental, it's abundantly clear whom he respects and whom he doesn't. The state bureaucracy clearly manages to mishandle the case at almost every turn; one lesson this book teaches is that, at least in what amounts to an epidemiological investigation, you can have too much decentralization. You really want people for whom such an outbreak is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. The EPA comes off a little better, though its penchant for chasing trendy topics is clear.

And unknown federal agencies like the National Institute of Environmental Health Science come off better yet.

The star players, though, are individual scientists, and the real drama comes as they face off against each other with their competing theories. From the start, Souder writes, there are two broad schools: those who think some chemical, most likely from a pesticide, lies at the root of the deformities; and those who think it's a parasite that has entered the frogs and caused their limbs to malform. The two theories represent two different worldviews: in the first, people are carelessly damaging all that lies around them; in the second, nature is a robust place where stuff simply happens all the time.

The researchers come together for scientific meetings that clarify the battlelines—and Souder makes it clear that at least some of the divisions

come down to personalities. The chief advocate of the parasite position, Stanley Sessions, seems as arrogant and unpleasant a person as you would care to meet. And yet, as the story drags on, his case seems more persuasive. In fact, most Americans who were following the story probably thought it came to an end last spring when Sessions and a Stanford student published papers in *Science* demonstrating a strong parasite connection.

But as Souder convincingly demonstrates, that didn't really end the debate. There's plenty of evidence that doesn't fit the parasite theory, especially a huge set of Canadian data set showing deformed frogs in agricultural areas and healthy ones elsewhere. Apparently ultraviolet light plays a role in damaging at least some species; hence the erosion of the ozone layer might be a villain. The truth is, we don't know yet what is deforming frogs, and we don't know yet why amphibians in general are in decline, and we don't know when we will know.

The science is still developing, and as Souder points out, "science as it is actually practiced in the everyday world is... like a collection of medieval fiefdoms.

Agencies and independent academics live and work in walled enclaves, among which communication and cooperation is possible, but often strained... Scientists, it turns out, suffer the same human foibles as everyone else. They're driven by ambition, by money, by ego, and by the perverse impulse to succeed amid the wreckage of someone else's failure."

One conclusion you could draw from that description is that scientists never really figure out anything. But that would be wrong—with enough work, they usually do, even when the problems are horrendously complicated. The best example is global warming, which in 1990 was at the same battling-theories stage that frog research currently finds itself in. But climatologists, well-funded and pushed by national governments around the globe, figured out a way to organize their efforts and, by 1995,

**A PLAGUE OF FROGS:
The Horrifying True Story**
by William Souder
Hyperion, \$23.95