

[*Freedom for Sale: Why the World Is Trading Democracy for Security*, John Kampfner, Basic Books, 294 pages]

Global Undemocratic Revolution

By James Bovard

Freedom for Sale is the best synopsis of the recent collapse of restraints on government power. John Kampfner, the editor of Britain's *New Statesman*, traveled the world seeking to answer the question: why have freedoms been so easily traded in return for security or prosperity?

Kampfner begins his tour in Singapore, where he was born. Lee Kuan Yew's 30-year reign as prime minister begat an authoritarian regime that combined high economic growth with endless petty impingements on personal liberties. Lee's sense of entitlement to power knew no bounds—he even chose spouses for senior government workers and dictated how many children they should have. With immaculate streets and the world's highest rate of executions, Singapore earned the nickname “Disneyland with the death penalty.”

While many Americans know that chewing gum is illegal in Singapore, they are unaware that until recently oral sex was punishable by two years in prison. The government has almost totally repressed political opposition. When journalists or others criticize, they are bankrupted by volleys of defamation suits. Kampfner notes, “People confide only in their good friends here; meaningful opinion polls do not exist.” But as long as the economy has boomed, there has been little or no resistance to authoritarianism.

Kampfner spent two stints as a journalist in Russia, one before and one after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He writes, “The West's overall approach during the

1990s was a mix of condescension, ingratiation, and insensitivity.” Perceived U.S. government meddling in Georgia in late 2003, which helped install Mikheil Saakashvili in power, was a turning point for the Russians, compounded by the U.S. intervention in the Ukrainian election the following year.

Freedom flourished in Russia after the Soviet Union collapsed, but has faded in the new century. Media criticism of the Russian regime is tempered by routine assassinations of bothersome reporters. According to the Russian Union of Journalists, “more than two hundred journalists have been killed in 10 years. In not a single case has the mastermind been arrested.” Putin and his cohorts routinely refer to “*zhurnalyuga*—journalist-scum.” Even organizations that merely document the crimes of the Stalin era have been targeted for police raids and repression, since they interfere with Putin's effort to revive patriotic fervor.

Putin's power has been practically unlimited since Boris Yeltsin crowned him as his successor. The Russian parliament has rubberstamped laws punishing “antistate behavior” that grant “the security services the right to kill enemies of the state at home and abroad. Another gives law enforcement agencies the right to view acts of dissent

deceased. Kampfner writes, “For nearly 30 years, these shoot-to-kill encounters have been a regular occurrence in the major cities, and, according to public opinion polls, they are highly popular with the public.” The Indian parliament passed sweeping anti-terrorism legislation in 2002 that gave the government power to detain terrorist suspects for up to a year without bail. Other anti-terrorism laws entitle authorities to arrest “relatives as hostages when a person wanted by the police absconds.” India's democratic pretensions have not stood in the way of horrific attacks by Hindu mobs on minority Muslims, sometimes aided and abetted by the police.

In some democracies, governing is indistinguishable from looting. In Italy after World War II, “a system of state larceny was enshrined.” Until the early 1990s, Italian politics was “denuded of respectability and credibility, and rotted to the core by corruption,” Kampfner remarks. After a two-year crackdown on thieving weasels, Italy reverted to form. This worked out well for Silvio Berlusconi, the media baron who snared three terms as president. He showed contempt for any limits on his own power and repeatedly pushed through parliament laws giving himself total legal immunity, regardless of what crimes he

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as forms of extremism or treason, crimes punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Treason has been redefined to include damaging Russia's constitutional order.”

India is the world's most populous democracy, but it is far more authoritarian than most Westerners recognize. “Police encounters” is the colloquial term for police killings, which are routinely open-air executions followed by the ritual planting of a weapon on the

might commit. He vigorously pressured the media to stifle criticism, including successfully pressuring one television channel to cancel a late night political satire that mocked him.

Kampfner wonders, “In a democracy, how can a leader who has openly set about to destroy an independent media and independent judiciary, and whose personal finances are murky at best, command such popularity?”

Yet as long as Berlusconi denounces

Communists and socialists, many Italians accept him as the incarnation of freedom. Last year, he broadened his political base by incorporating another political party into his own and naming the combination The People of Freedom. "We are the party of Italians who love freedom and who want to remain free," he declared. And Berlusconi must have absolute legal immunity so that he will have unfettered power to fight the enemies of freedom.

This issue flared up briefly in the election campaign that ended on May 6. Blair's successor as prime minister, Gordon Brown, was wearing a microphone for a TV network as he went out and talked to commoners. He ran into one elderly widow who complained about immigrants. After he returned to his chauffeured car, he groused that the woman was a "bigot" and wanted to know which aide allowed her to talk to him. Typical stuff for lordly politicians—

gal wiretapping program that eavesdropped on thousands of Americans' phone calls and e-mails without warrants. After the *New York Times* exposed the program, Bush bragged about it in his State of the Union address and received a standing ovation from Republican members of Congress.

The more oppressive U.S. policies became, the more servile the media acted. Even after the Abu Ghraib photos and John Yoo's "presidential torture entitlement" memo surfaced, most newspapers and magazines ducked the issue. This pattern was locked in place by late 2001, when Attorney General John Ashcroft declared, "those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty ... only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and ... give ammunition to America's enemies." Even if the critics were accurate, they were still traitors.

One of the nation's most prominent pundits, Michael Kinsley, admitted in 2002 that he had been listening to his "inner Ashcroft": "As a writer and editor, I have been censoring myself and others quite a bit since September 11." Kinsley conceded that sometimes it was "simple cowardice" that sparked the censorship. Kampfnier notes the intense pressure on American commentators during the war on terror and observes, "the most sensitive issue of them all was policy toward Israel." Criticizing Israel after 9/11 was as prudent as praising Stalin during the Cold War.

Freedom for Sale places much of the blame for democracy's decline on the pursuit of wealth at any price. Politicians who praise free markets often receive *carte blanche* to abuse constitutions. But free markets by themselves are not inherently depraving. Democracy is floundering in part because politicians gorged on power for decades.

This is the age of Leviathan Democracy. The bigger government grows, the more clueless citizens become. The contract between rulers and ruled is replaced by a blank check. Government becomes an elective dictatorship,

DURING THE DECADE OF BLAIR'S RULE, PARLIAMENT CREATED MORE THAN 3,000 NEW CRIMINAL OFFENSES.

The chapter on the United Kingdom is the strongest part of the book. During the decade of Blair's rule, Parliament created "more than 3,000 new criminal offenses. That corresponded to two new offenses for each day Parliament sat during Blair's premiership." British citizens are treated like a mass of undicted criminal conspirators. The UK is now the most surveilled nation on earth, with over 5 million closed-circuit television cameras sweeping the streets, waiting to detect anyone publicly urinating or committing any of a long list of other offenses. The cameras automatically recognize license plates and faces, as well as "suspicious behavior." New software issues an alert when "people are walking suspiciously or strangely." The CCTVs in some places are equipped with loudspeakers to permit government officials to shout at people who litter. In Liverpool, drones hover 100 yards above the ground lurking for scofflaws. Their loudspeakers startle Brits foolish enough to believe no one is watching their mischief.

The Blair regime also helped unleash a tidal wave of wiretaps. Government agencies are requesting approval for more than 300,000 wiretap operations a year—probably a hundred times more than the corresponding rate of administrations in the United States. (Illicit wiretaps are another story: the U.S. may far surpass Britain on that score.)

except that his microphone was still on. One Twitter user quipped, "Gordon Brown has created a total surveillance society. Glad to see he got caught out, now he knows how we all feel."

Once a government has become committed to achieving omniscience over its subjects, any half-witted justification for expanding the dragnet suffices. After the British government created the largest DNA database in the world, ministers urged that "police be allowed to take the DNA of anyone stopped for not wearing seatbelts." When people balked at a mandatory national identification card with extensive biometric data, Charles Clarke, the home secretary, declared that the proposal was a "profoundly civil libertarian measure because it promotes the most fundamental civil liberty in our society, which is the right to live free from crime and fear." After promising freedom from fear, a politician can always invoke polls showing widespread fears to justify seizing new power. The more people government frightens, the more benevolent its dictatorial policies appear.

But nowhere is the recent decline of democracy more evident than in the United States. After the 9/11 terror attacks, President George W. Bush effectively suspended habeas corpus and claimed a right to detain anyone in perpetuity on his own say so. The National Security Agency launched a massive ille-

and elections merely signify whose turn it is to trample the Constitution. Because people have been taught to expect their rulers to save them from all perils, they cheer any action that either boosts their benefits or assuages their fears. Because the media relies on government “news” handouts, it ignores most official abuses and instead whines about the perils of citizens distrusting their masters.

Kampfner complains about the collapse of “redistributive democracy” in recent years. But politicians are buying more votes than ever before. At the state and local level in the U.S., government employees and pensioners often have a death grip on everyone else’s paychecks. Government entitlement spending is pushing nation after nation towards insolvency.

He also contends that politicians have “opted out of economic rule-making.” Maybe in Singapore, but not in the United States. It was politicians and political appointees who poured far too much credit into the housing sector, causing one of the biggest boom-and-busts in American history. It was politicians who created a new ad hoc “rule” that entitled them to bail out Wall Street and a host of financial institutions that richly deserved bankruptcy. It is politicians who empower and shield the Federal Reserve, permitting it to manipulate everyone’s finances according to secret rules that provide the greatest benefit to insiders.

The ultimate threat to democracy’s survival may be the fact that many people simply do not value their own freedom. When elections degenerate into a search for benevolent caretakers and cage-keepers, authoritarianism is almost guaranteed to win on Election Day. *Freedom for Sale* is a powerful wake-up call for anyone who still believes in the inevitable global triumph of democracy. ■

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[*Design and Truth*, Robert Grudin, Yale University Press, 224 pages]

Building Character

By Deborah K. Dietsch

FROM THE RENAISSANCE onward, architects and designers have considered themselves bearers of great truths. Drawing on this history, Robert Grudin argues in *Design and Truth* for aesthetic honesty as an antidote to the unethical practices of today. Beauty, he insists, should not serve the whims of authority: “If good design tells the truth, poor design tells a lie, a lie usually related, in one way or another, to the getting or abuse of power.”

But this book is not really about design, at least not in a conventional sense. It cuts a large swath through culture, covering literature, politics, philosophy, music, and computers, to interpret design as a metaphor for creative thought in any field. “It calls for us to create a unity of part with whole,” he writes, “a finished product that is harmonious with society and with nature.”

Unfortunately for creators, even life itself pales in significance before Grudin’s uncompromising aesthetic. And the power that puts artistic excellence at risk can be that of the market as well as that of the despot. A professor emeritus at the University of Oregon, Grudin can’t always appreciate the demands of designing a building or a product in the world of commerce. As the late Philip Johnson once quipped, “Architects are pretty much high-class whores. We can turn down projects the way that they can turn down some clients, but we’ve both got to say yes to someone if we want to stay in business.”

Grudin would prefer that creators say no—even at the cost of their own lives. His book begins with an account of the 16th-century Japanese Buddhist priest Sen no Rikyu, who devised an austere

elegant tea ceremony. So dear to him was this ritual that Rikyu would not hasten it even for a meeting with warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Nor would he revise the ceremony at the autocrat’s behest. Enraged, Hideyoshi ordered the priest to commit suicide. In uncompromising style, Rikyu obeyed.

Such is the price of integrity. But the cost of compromising an artistic vision is even higher, Grudin argues. He describes architect Minoru Yamasaki as a “tragic hero” whose fatal flaw—fatal, that is, for the inhabitants of the World Trade Center—was his willingness to grant his client’s wish to increase the height of the twin towers from 80 to 110 stories. He also agreed to create large, unencumbered floor plates by reducing the number of stairways from six to three and moving the buildings’ structural supports from the inside to the outside skin.

Grudin mischaracterizes Yamasaki’s design as “unstable, inhibiting, ugly, unsafe,” when in fact it used innovative engineering techniques to ensure the towers’ durability. Steel supports in the exterior walls sustained gravity loads from above and wind gusts from the sides. The World Trade Center was not defectively designed. No architect could have anticipated what would happen when two fuel-laden aircraft struck the buildings.

But Grudin goes further. He argues that the conspicuous towers were targeted by al-Qaeda because they were “symbols of Satanic power” as well as icons of capitalistic greed. The architect violated a sacred Muslim code in borrowing imagery from mosques and holy sites for a secular purpose. Osama bin Laden, Grudin asserts, may have seen Yamasaki as “some sort of Darth Vader” because of his attempts to westernize Islamic architecture. (Before tackling the World Trade Center, the architect had designed an air terminal in Saudi Arabia built by the bin Laden construction company). All of this seems far-fetched, given that the towers’ vertical ribs can just as easily be compared to the tracery of Gothic cathedrals as the pat-