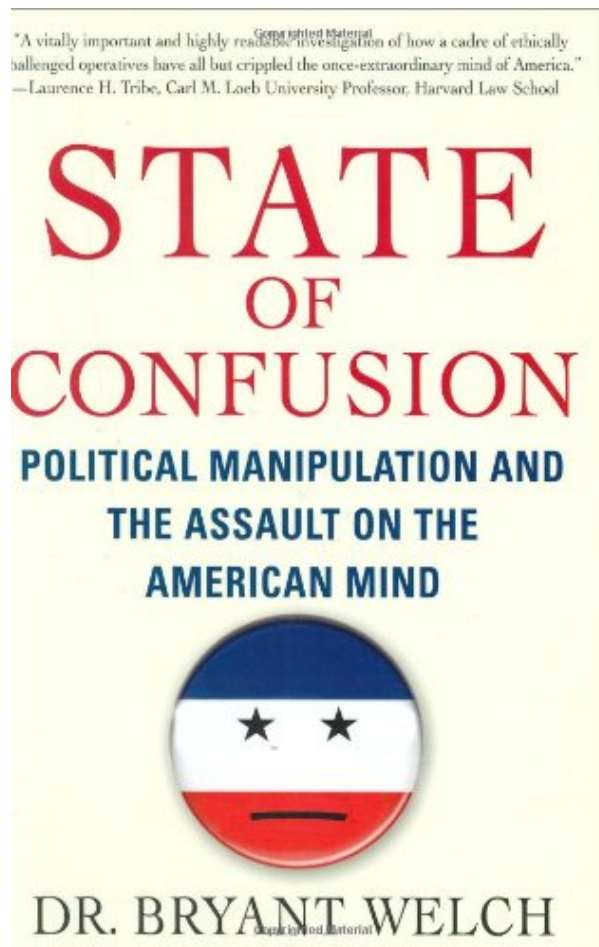


STATE OF CONFUSION: POLITICAL MANIPULATION AND THE ASSAULT ON THE AMERICAN MIND BY BRYANT WELCH



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Review

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Finally, the answer to the many questions that have been preying on the minds of millions of Americans has arrived. Why are Americans so vulnerable to divisive political tactics? Why did Americans get dragged into such an unwise war in Iraq? Why do fundamentalist religious groups, Fox News, and right-wing radio still play such influential roles in America's political landscape? And why are long-accepted rational scientific ideas like evolution under siege? These questions hold America's future in the balance. Ultimately, they are questions about the American mind. Psychologist-attorney Dr. Bryant Welch has the answers.

If America is going to change the mind-set that led us to war in Iraq and left us unable to confront our serious national problems, this book is vitally important. Drawing on his unique experience both as a clinical psychologist and a Washington, D.C., political figure with the American Psychological Association, Dr. Welch shows how the long-term effects of sophisticated new forms of political manipulation have not only led to our debacle in Iraq but are also currently undercutting America's ability to address its very serious problems. In the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, a husband drives his wife to the brink of insanity by playing games with her sense of reality. Just as in the movie, America's most recent political "gaslighters," such as George W. Bush, Karl Rove, Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and many religious leaders, have generated and exploited confusion in the minds of countless Americans.

Gaslighters prey on their victim's vulnerability to paranoia, sexual perplexity, and envy to undermine the mind's ability to function rationally. Welch examines why millions of Americans, in response to such assaults, subconsciously and dangerously create their own simplistic reality, even if it is completely different from the more complex reality of the world.

Most important, *State of Confusion* explains how and why Americans must act now to fight back against this harmful manipulation before it's too late. Dr. Welch's exploration of the American mind is both fascinating and frightening, and *State of Confusion* is a must-read for everyone who cares about the future of this great country.

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Most helpful customer reviews

30 of 40 people found the following review helpful.

Substantially true, but not very deep and not one of the best books on the subject

By Robert Moore

I'm somewhat perplexed by the string of five-star reviews. Despite agreeing with the author on virtually every point, I do not think this is a very good book. The book lacked depth at certain points, borders on abject ignorance whenever matters of religion are addressed, and consistently lacks in nuance. I also found the book marred by a tendency to engage in psychoanalytic citing of anonymous cases, something that is simply out of place in writing about our current political crises.

I have to confess that as a film buff I was put off at nearly the very beginning, when Welch introduces the notion of "gaslighting" -- a metaphor that is quite apt in discussing the Right's persistent and largely successful attempt to muddy the minds of Americans in thinking about politics -- and talks exclusively of the 1944 Hollywood film starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman that was a remake of a superior 1940 British film starring the great Anton Walbrook, which was itself a film version of the Patrick Hamilton stage play. OK, not mentioning any of this is indicative of the persistent lack of depth I found in the book. No doubt the author wanted to keep things simple (assuming he was aware of the earlier film or play; it is possible that he knows only the later Hollywood version), but throughout the book I found myself wanting to add footnotes. The fact is that I am not sure I learned a single new fact reading the book. Any reader who has read a substantial number of recent books on the state of politics in America will already know everything contained in the book. Many will already have a deeper understanding than can be gained from the book. Though the concept of gaslighting is helpful, it is the only new thing I gained.

I do think the discussion of healthcare was strong. Though even there he misses a lot that is common knowledge. For instance, he mentions that universal healthcare under Truman failed because of a fear of communism. In fact, if you look into it in more depth, the fight against universal healthcare was led by Southern politicians who understood that Truman's plan would have resulted in whites and black being treated in the same hospitals, something they found intolerable. (As a Southerner, I find much to regret in my heritage.) A fear of communism might have been a secondary factor, but the main reasons universal healthcare was defeated were racist.

Any discussion of religion in the book is simplistic and uninformed. There are always two perspectives in a discussion of religion: an insider's perspective and an outsider's. I personally am a leftist (a passionate democrat whose political values are informed by the New Testament, Enlightenment ideals of justice and fairness, and socialism, equal parts Sermon of the Mount, Thomas Jefferson, and Ernst Bloch), but am also a largely orthodox Christian. My own discussion of religion is that of an insider. It is unquestionably possible to discuss religion intelligently as an outsider. One does not find that here. I found none of Welch's comments on religion to be either informed or perceptive. The perception was lacking simply because he apparently understands why he does not care for religion, without grasping why others do. Those he verbally gestures at the enormous complexity of American Christianity, it is not heartfelt. Like too many today, he ignores the fact that there are vast numbers of Christians who are politically left-leaning. Even within fundamentalism an increasing number of Christians are becoming disturbed by the so-called Religious Right's lack of concern on environmental and poverty issues. Jesus talks of the poor more than anything else in the Gospels; more and more conservative Christians are taking note of that. But Welch has no feel for this diversity. He lumps together large groups of Christians who ought not to be lumped. Frankly, you shouldn't publish comments on something you don't know about.

I was tempted to make this a bibliographic review, citing 20 or 30 books that are better than this one. Let me cite only a few. David Brock's *THE REPUBLICAN NOISE MACHINE* gives far greater detail and provides more insight on how the top-down leadership of the GOP has systematically mislead and misinformed Americans for the past forty years. Thomas Frank's *WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?* (and his new book *THE WRECKING CREW*) examines in depth the bait and switch tactics of the GOP. Naomi Klein's *THE SHOCK DOCTRINE* details the catastrophic results of the free-market economic ideology that has dominated the GOP (and tragically the Democratic party as well) over the past forty years. Kevin Phillips's *AMERICAN THEOCRACY* and Michelle Goldberg's *KINGDOM COMING* provide perceptive and insightful outsider perspectives on the Religious Right, while Randall Balmer's *THY KINGDOM COME: HOW THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT DISTORTS THE FAITH AND THREATENS AMERICA* provides an insider's perspective (his *MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THE GLORY*, published by Oxford University Press, shows the kind of complexity that exists even in the Religious Right, something Welch

ignores). The most passionate and well-reasoned attack on the notion of American (Christian) exceptionalism has come from a deeply religious evangelical pastor, Gregory Boyd's *THE MYTH OF A CHRISTIAN NATION*. I will gesture at Garry Wills's *HEART AND MIND* while adding that there are a host of good leftist political books written by Christians. In a string of excellent books, George Lakoff has dissected the niceties of political discourse, beginning with *MORAL POLITICS*, repackaging that in concentrated form in *DON'T THINK OF AN ELEPHANT*, and continuing in *WHOSE FREEDOM?* and *THE POLITICAL MIND*. I could easily name 20 or 30 books that I would recommend before this one.

In summary, while the metaphor of gaslighting is quite apt and helpful in thinking about the strategies of the right in America today, it isn't sufficient to make this a good book. To be honest, I'm giving this book three stars only because I agree with the author politically. But all of this has been said by others, better, with more insight, and definitely more sensitivity to religious matters.

19 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Robert L. Welker, Psychoanalyst

By Robert Welker, Ph.D.

Bryant Welch's recent book, *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind* (2008) Thomas Dunne Books, provides a compelling psychoanalytic framework for understanding the collective mental pathology driven by current sociopolitical machinations. He describes three "battleground psychological states" (paranoia, sexual perplexity and envy) that are manipulated in "gaslighting" the public--duping voters and consumers through the provision of defensive maneuvers that alleviate anxiety and create unquestioning believers in causes benefiting those in power.

Mental dynamics remain in focus throughout Dr. Welch's penetrating analysis, the uniqueness of which stems from his perspicacity, the breadth of his professional experience (psychology, law, and politics) and the intensity of his effort. A personal anecdote in his acknowledgments is illuminating: "My personal mental image while writing the book was to framing a house. What made it especially difficult was the sense that I had to drive every nail with my head." (Page xii)

While reading *State of Confusion* I remembered that when I decided to major in psychology (during the Nixon Administration, the Vietnam War, post political assassinations) I wanted viable answers to why our nation was so crazy. Forty years later I had all but given up hope that psychology could be of much help countering the formidable power of self-serving politicians and marketers. Reading Bryant Welch's book renewed my hope.

Bryant gives us a practicable framework with which to promote healthier functioning of "The American Mind." I hope the American Psychoanalytic Association takes advantage of this opportunity by supporting and elaborating his ideas, joining him in the arduous task of driving each nail with our heads.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

A "must-read" for every caring, thinking voter

By Jeana

If you're interested in -- or just curious about -- how the US got where it now is in Iraq and among the nations of the world, you need to read this book. It explains how the "gaslighters" [Karl Rove, Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, etc] manipulated the minds of American citizens, increasing their vulnerability after 9/11, to make Americans more dependent on "their" brand of reality and to enable their agenda to be achieved. They warped American citizens' ability to "think," and discredited those persons and professions that could foster "clearer" thinking and decision-making. The psychological explanations are invaluable tools for helping readers identify similar on-going manipulations from the current Presidential campaigns. *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*

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