

The Authoritarians

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## Preface



I realize that my making this book available for free on the internet raises questions about my judgment, especially since I am a psychologist. The well-known theory of cognitive dissonance says that people will value something more if they pay a lot of money to get it. So how much will people value what they get for free? Also, if somebody can make money off a book, how much common sense can he have if he gives it away? Why should you read a book

written by someone who has so little common sense?

There's a lot of convincing evidence that dissonance theory is right, and so I am running the risk of your saying, "It can't be any good if it's free." But there is another psychological principle which says if people experience something that meets a need, it will be a rewarding experience. So even though this book is free, I hope that you will find it worth your reading, and that if you think it's a good book, you will tell others about this web site so they can read it too. I'm not doing any advertising in the *New York Times*.

If you want to know why I'm passing on the big bucks, fame, and cocktail party hors d'oeuvres that a blockbuster best seller brings an author, it's partly because this book would never have rung up big sales. I did make one attempt to place it with a "trade" publisher, but when their editor said no I stopped acting out of habit and started reflecting. I think what I have found is rather important to the survival of American democracy. As such, it should be made available to everyone, and be essentially free. The "www" makes this possible, and that is why we have met here. So how do you do? Allow me to introduce my friend in the photo above, whose name is Harvey. ☺

## Acknowledgments



If it turns out you do not like this book, blame John Dean. You never would have heard of my research if he had not recently plowed through my studies, trying to understand, first, various people he knew in the Nixon White House, and then some leading figures of the Republican Party of 2004. John Dean is quite a guy. I think I offended him once by addressing him as “Honest John,” which I meant in the sense of “Honest Abe.” John strikes one with his candor and openness. I treasure his friendship as much as I treasure his unfailing help. Some of his closest friends, I have discovered, go back to his high school days. I think that says a lot about a person, especially given what John went through in the 1970s. The “former counsel to the president” has campaigned endlessly on behalf of my research, making it known wherever he could. This book was his idea, and you would not be reading it if he had not kept “bringing me up on the stage” with him as he talked about his *Conservatives Without Conscience*.



John is too young to be my mentor, a position that was filled many years ago by the distinguished psychologist, M. Brewster Smith. No one would probably have discovered any of my findings on authoritarianism if Brewster had not given a ringing endorsement to my first book many years ago. That endorsement was particularly gratifying because Brewster has been *the* knowledgeable, critical voice in the field since its beginnings over 50 years ago. And it was Brewster who suggested some years ago that I submit my studies of authoritarian aggression to the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s competition for best research in the behavioral sciences. I sent him a basket of fruit when it won, and now I would like thank him again, and more publicly. Brewster has won almost all the honors that psychology can bestow, but my appreciation of him is even more heartfelt.



Jean Altemeyer, Bruce Hunsberger, Emily Hunsberger, & a big acorn.

I must honor as well Bruce Hunsberger, who joined me--before his death from leukemia in 2003--in much of the research described in the chapter on religion. Bruce was my best (guy) friend for most of my life. I still miss him, and every now and then when I log on I fantasize that there'll be a message from Bruce saying that one can do research in the afterlife. "So hurry up."

Then there is my much maligned wife, Jean. I have created the impression in previous acknowledgments that she has no interest in my research. In truth, she asks about it frequently. She just would never do what you're on the threshold of doing: read about it. But she is more than my best friend, period, more than "the girl I gave up Lent for" in the Tom Lehrer song, more than my co-adventurer in the Byzantine world of parenting. She is the love of my life. I have no idea why she agreed to marry me after our second date in 1964. But she did, and I am forever grateful for that--as she well knows.



Andrew Perchaluk of the University of Manitoba expertly did the web site and PDF stuff. Andrew has the rare ability to talk to electronic innocents such as I as though we really are sentient beings, and at the same time to know when to say, "Just push this key, and then that one." Also, if he had not had to work on my computer, he probably would have eventually forgotten all the things that were wrong with Windows 98. He has suffered much and is greatly appreciated.

Dedication:  
To our son Sean



## Introduction

In the fall of 2005 I found myself engaged, most unexpectedly, in a heavy exchange of emails with the man who had blown the whistle on Watergate, John Dean. He was writing a book about “conservatives without conscience”--which the late Senator Barry Goldwater was to have co-authored. Dean, Goldwater, and others with solid Republican credentials had been alarmed by the capture of the Grand Old Party by the Religious Right and its seemingly amoral leaders. Dean was plowing through the social science literatures on conservatism and religion to see what perspective academics could offer his analysis, and eventually he ran across my name.

Who am I? I’m a nearly retired psychology professor in Canada who has spent most of his life studying authoritarianism. I got into this field by being lazy. When I took the exams for getting a Ph.D. at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1965, I failed a question about a famous early effort to understand the authoritarian personality. I had to write a paper to prove I could learn at least something about this research, which had gotten itself into a huge hairy mess by then. However, I got caught up in the tangle too. Thus I didn’t start studying authoritarianism because I am a left-winger (I think I’m a moderate on most issues)<sup>1</sup> (if you want to read a note, click on the number) or because I secretly hated my father. I got into it because it presented a long series of puzzles to be solved, and I love a good mystery.

Now, 40 years later, everyone who knows me would rather volunteer for a root canal operation at a school for spastic dental students than ask me a question about authoritarianism. My wife has never read a single page in any of my books. Few of my colleagues in the psychology department at the University of Manitoba have asked about my research since 1973. People I meet at parties, including folks in their 70s, inevitably discover they have to call the baby-sitter about three minutes after casually asking me, “What do you do?” You can’t shut

me up once I get going. Yet John Dean was reading everything I had written and pummeling me with insightful questions for months on end. I had died and gone to heaven. And since John's best-selling book, *Conservatives Without Conscience* had used my research to help explain how America was going to the devil, he thought I should write an easy-read, non-technical account of what I have found before I do die, and go to heaven or the devil. It will begin appearing on a screen near you soon.

### *What is Authoritarianism?*

Authoritarianism is something authoritarian followers and authoritarian leaders cook up between themselves. It happens when the followers submit too much to the leaders, trust them too much, and give them too much leeway to do whatever they want--which often is something undemocratic, tyrannical and brutal. In my day, authoritarian fascist and authoritarian communist dictatorships posed the biggest threats to democracies, and eventually lost to them in wars both hot and cold. But authoritarianism itself has not disappeared, and I'm going to present the case in this book that the greatest threat to American democracy today arises from a militant authoritarianism that has become a cancer upon the nation.

We know an awful lot about authoritarian followers. In one way or another, hundreds of social scientists have studied them since World War II. We have a pretty good idea of who they are, where they come from, and what makes them tick. By comparison, we know little about authoritarian leaders because we only recently started studying them. That may seem strange, but how hard is it to figure out why someone would like to have massive amounts of power? The psychological mystery has always been, why would someone prefer a dictatorship to freedom? So social scientists have focused on the followers, who are seen as the main, underlying problem.

I am going to tell you about my research on authoritarianism, but I am not going to give the kind of technical scientific report I lay on other scientists. Whatever ends up getting crunched in this book, it's not going to be a pile of numbers. Instead, I'll very briefly describe how the studies were done and what then happened. In many cases I'll invite you to pretend you are a subject in an experiment, and ask what you would say or do. I hope you'll generally find the presentation relaxed, conversational, even playful, because that's the way I like to write--even on serious topics--to the annoyance of many a science editor. (A sense of humor helps a lot when you spend your life studying authoritarians.)

But I have not "dumbed down" anything. This is not "Authoritarianism for Dummies." ("Six months ago I couldn't even spell 'authoritarian,' and now I am one.") It's an account of some social science research for people who have not sat through a lot of classes on research methods and statistics--a good many of which, it so happens, I also never attended, especially on nice days. I'll put some of the technical mumbo-jumbo in the optional notes for pitiful people such as I who just can't live without it. If you want to bore through even denser presentations of my research, with methodological details and statistical tests jamming things up, the way poor John Dean had to, click here for note <sup>2</sup>.

But why should you even bother reading this book? I would offer three reasons. First, if you are concerned about what has happened in America since a radical right-wing segment of the population began taking control of the government about a dozen years ago, I think you'll find a lot in this book that says your fears are well founded. As many have pointed out, the Republic is once again passing through perilous times. The concept of a constitutional democracy has been under attack--and by the American government no less! The mid-term elections of 2006 give hope that the best values and traditions of the country will ultimately prevail. But it could prove a huge mistake to think that the enemies of freedom and equality have lost the war just because they were

recently rebuffed at the polls. I'll be very much surprised if their leaders don't frame the setback as a test of the followers' faith, causing them to redouble their efforts. They came so close to getting what they want, they're not likely to pack up and go away without an all-out drive. But even if they temporarily fade from view, they will still be there, aching for a dictatorship that will force their views on everyone. The country is not out of danger yet.

The second reason I can offer for reading what follows is that it is *not* chock full of opinions, but experimental evidence. Liberals have stereotypes about conservatives, and conservatives have stereotypes about liberals. Moderates have stereotypes about both. Anyone who has watched, or been a liberal arguing with a conservative (or vice versa) knows that personal opinion and rhetoric can be had a penny a pound. But the arguing never seems to get anywhere. Whereas if you set up a fair and square experiment in which people can act nobly, fairly, and with integrity, and you find that most of one group does, and most of another group does not, that's a fact, not an opinion. And if you keep finding the same thing experiment after experiment, and other people do too, then that's a body of facts that demands attention.<sup>3</sup> Some people, we have seen to our dismay, don't care a hoot what scientific investigation reveals. But most people do. If the data were fairly gathered and we let them do the talking, we should be on a higher plane than the current, "Sez you!"

The last reason why you might be interested in the hereafter is that you might want more than just facts about authoritarians, but *understanding* and insight into why they act the way they do. Which is often mind-boggling. How can they revere those who gave their lives defending freedom and then support moves to take that freedom away? How can they go on believing things that have been disproved over and over again, and disbelieve things that are well established? How can they think they are the best people in the world, when so much of what they do ought to show them they are not? Why do their leaders so often turn out to be crooks and hypocrites? Why are both the followers and the

leaders so aggressive that hostility is practically their trademark? By the time you have finished this book, I think you will understand the reasons. All of this, and much more, fit into place once you see what research has uncovered going on in authoritarian minds.

Ready to go exploring?

*Chapter 1 of this book, "Who Are the Authoritarian Followers?" will appear on this website on January 15, 2007. A chapter a week will be added thereafter, until all seven chapters are present. They will then remain here for at least a year.*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have found that some people make assumptions about why I study authoritarianism that get in the way of what the data have to say. The stereotype about professors is that they are tall, thin, and liberals. I'm more liberal than I am tall and thin, that's for sure. But I don't think anyone who knows me well would say I am a left-winger. My wife is a liberal, and she and all her liberal friends will tell you I am definitely not one of them. Sometimes they make me leave the room. I have quite mixed feelings about abortion, labor unions, welfare and warfare. I supported the war in Afghanistan from the beginning; I disapproved of the war in Iraq from its start in March 2003.

I am not now, nor have I ever been, a member of the Communist Party, or any other political party. I do give money to various parties, trying to defeat whomever I am most disgustatated with at the time. (My political contributions have almost become automatic withdrawals from my bank account since one of our sons became a Member of the Legislative Assembly in our province.) I did not flee to Canada in 1968 because of the war in Viet-Nam. I crossed the border

with my draft board's good wishes because the University of Manitoba offered me the best job I could find. And my research has not been funded by "some liberal think-tank" or foundation. Instead, I paid for almost all of it out of my own pocket. I have not had a research grant since 1972--not because I am opposed to people giving me money, but because I proved so lousy at getting grants that I gave up. (Whereas I, like my politician son, found I was a soft touch whenever I hit me up for some dough.) [Back to introduction](#)

<sup>2</sup> The best scientifically up-to-snuff presentation of my research on authoritarian followers is contained in *The Authoritarian Specter*, published in 1996 by Harvard University Press. The only reports of my research on authoritarian leaders are 1) a chapter entitled, "The Other 'Authoritarian Personality'" in Volume 30 (1998) of a series of books called *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, edited by Mark Zanna and published by Academic Press, and 2) an article in the *Journal of Social Psychology*, edited by Keith Davis, in 2004 entitled "Highly Dominating, Highly Authoritarian Personalities" (Volume 144, pages 421-447).

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<sup>3</sup> I hope you'll agree that the studies were fair and square. It's your call, of course, and everybody else's. That's the beauty of the scientific method. If another researcher--and there are hundreds of them--thinks I only got the results I did because of the particular way I set things up, phrased things, and so on, she can repeat my experiment her way, find out, and let everybody know what happened. It's the wonderful way science polices and corrects itself.

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