

America in Peril Discussion Outline

Discussion leads to better understanding. Pooling knowledge and ideas brings out the nuances of a topic. There are various ways to organize and conduct group discussions. Those with even a little experience will have no problem getting started. For convenience, however, I will outline a possible approach.

My thought is to devote a meeting to each chapter. That could be broken down further if desired but for this outline I will assume a meeting per chapter. There are eleven chapters so I recommend twelve meetings. The first would be a get-acquainted and introductory meeting but it is very important in setting the theme of the discussion series.

Meeting 1 (Introductory)

First on the agenda are introductions (name tags if necessary). Then each participant tells a little about him- or herself, and why they are interested in discussing the topic of America in Peril.

Discussion leader introduces the topic. At this point the leader might read, or have someone read, the Introduction to the book. The following items can start discussion:

Part 1 -- Our Declaration of Independence distinguishes between “country” and “government.”

- What are those distinctions?
- How do those distinctions apply to America with three branches of government?
- What is the function of government in a democracy?

Part 2 – Theodore Roosevelt wrote an editorial for the May 7, 1918 edition of the *Kansas City Star*:

“The President is merely the most important among a large number of public servants. He should be supported or opposed exactly to the degree which is warranted by his good conduct or bad conduct, his efficiency or inefficiency in rendering loyal, able, and disinterested service to the Nation as a whole. Therefore it is absolutely necessary that there should be full liberty to tell the truth about his acts, and this means that it is exactly necessary to blame him when he does wrong as to praise him when he does right. Any other attitude in an American citizen is both base and servile. To announce that there must be no criticism of the President, or that we are to stand by the President, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public.”

- What does “loyalty to America” and “patriotism” mean to you?
- How would you explain to someone that pointing out the president’s failings is not an unpatriotic act?
- Why do we have a duty to question authority?
- How do we confront the feeling of helplessness engendered by Big Government?

The last item on the agenda of all the meetings is to review briefly the next chapter, of which all are to read by the next meeting. Each person can be assigned a subsection of to investigate further and briefly report on (set a time limit for each one's report next meeting).

Meeting 2 (Chapter 1)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- How does the neoconservative agenda for world domination reconcile with democratic principles?
- How much of the neoconservative agenda can you see implemented so far?
- Describe your feelings on how the 2000 election was decided.
- What useful function, if any, does the Electoral College fulfill today when modern technology allows electing the president and vice president by direct popular vote?
- How much involvement do you think the Bush administration had in the 9/11 attacks?
- With today's technologies and capabilities, why do you think Osama bin Laden hasn't been captured?

Briefly review next week's discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 3 (Chapter 2)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- How threatening is the USA PATRIOT Act to democracy?
- America has always required a "just cause" to obtain a warrant to spy on private citizens. How does warrantless surveillance threaten our Fourth Amendment rights?
- What restrictions would you put on data mining, if any? Elaborate.
- What dangers to privacy do you see in nationally standardized drivers' licenses?
- All things considered, how much protection do you think whistleblowers should have?

Briefly review next week's discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 4 (Chapter 3)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- What part does the Department of Homeland Security play in fulfilling the neoconservative agenda?
- Discuss any personal experiences resulting from ATS, US-VISIT, and the new e-passports.
- Through the National Applications Office, information from military spy satellites is available to civilian law enforcement officers. Does this make us safer? Explain.
- What part do you think a National Intelligence Director plays in fulfilling the neoconservative agenda?

Briefly review next week's discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 5 (Chapter 4)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- Do you see any dangers when the Pentagon becomes involved with "human intelligence" (as opposed to gathering intelligence by "technical means" to support military operations)? Explain.
- Discuss TALON and CIFA with regard to privacy. How do they affect our First Amendment rights? ... our Fourth Amendment rights?
- How has the Northern Command helped the neoconservative agenda?
- How much importance do you place on the *Posse Comitatus* Act?
- What are your feelings about our homeland being a theater of military operations – a battlefield?

Briefly review next week's discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 6 (Chapter 5)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- Do you think overseas phone calls to the US should be monitored without a warrant? Explain.
- Has the Bush administration misled the public regarding “the president’s preemptive role in foreign affairs?” Explain.
- Did the NSA violate Constitutional guarantees by data mining commercial call records? Explain.
- How do you feel about the “State Secrets Privilege.”
- Discuss the propriety of the CIA/Treasury Department’s SWIFT monitoring system.

Briefly review next week’s discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 7 (Chapter 6)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- To what extent has the Bush administration been unaccountable to the people?
- Why is the Freedom of Information Act important to our democracy?
- Has the current use of “sensitive but unclassified” information been a blank check for secrecy in government? Explain.
- How is the Critical Infrastructure Information Act of 2002 dangerous to public safety?
- Do you think presidential records should be released to the public in a defined and reasonable period of time? Elaborate.
- Where would you place the balance point between national safety and the public’s right to know regarding how documents are stamped “Confidential,” “Secret,” and “Top Secret”?

Briefly review next week’s discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 8 (Chapter 7)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- How would you reconcile “patriotism” with love of country?
- Relate some personal experiences with a granfalloon.
- Relate some personal experiences regarding the promotion of pseudo patriotism through the rationalization trap.
- Describe examples of covert propaganda you may have witnessed.

Briefly review next week’s discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 9 (Chapter 8)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- How aware were you of the detentions following 9/11?
- How important is *habeas corpus* to you?
- How do you feel about immigration courts being completely under the control of the Executive Branch?
- Why do you think the Judicial Branch didn’t step in more forcefully to protect people detained in secret without access to a lawyer or *habeas corpus*?
- From your experience, how widely known are the deaths of immigrants detained under immigration court rulings?

Briefly review next week’s discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 10 (Chapter 9)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- In your opinion, how credible is the designation “enemy combatant” as opposed to “prisoner of war” to avoid treaty responsibilities?
- In your opinion, how credible is the use of “military commissions” instead of “courts martial” for trying alleged terrorist detainees?

- How do you feel about America exporting torture throughout the world?
- Discuss the morality of America's offshore prison at Guantanamo Bay and how it squares with American values?
- What are the moral implications of having a Constitution and Bill of Rights that only applies to American citizens?

Briefly review next week's discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 11 (Chapter 10)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- How do you feel about the *de-facto* repeal of the *Posse Comitatus* Act?
- Do you think Bush's National Continuity Policy would actually allow him to circumvent Congress in a national emergency?
- Describe what you think would be necessary to trigger martial law.
- Do you think military personnel and mercenary soldiers would really enforce martial law in all its grisly aspects?
- Do you think the Civilian Augmentation Program would be used to build detention camps in the US?
- In your opinion, how likely is a declaration of martial law in the US?

Briefly review next week's discussion chapter and decide on who will investigate and report on specific aspects.

Meeting 12 (Chapter 11)

Report by those assigned deeper investigation of specific topics in this chapter (remind them of the time limit).

Discussion-starters:

- Bob introduced "thought bites" which affected his philosophy. Have you ever been influenced by thought bites?
- Have you ever experienced an "I-Thou" encounter as described by Martin Buber?
- How can one spread Leo Tolstoy's "spiritual conception of life" in America today?
- George Zabelka admonished everyone to "Do something for peace. Do anything. But do something." Discuss what people can do today to abate the perils America faces.

- Do you think democracy must die before people will acquire a spiritual perception of life?

These last discussion questions could lead to what the members of the group will do. Some may go on to start their own discussion groups. Others may become more ethically influential in politics, or religion, or business, or many other areas. The possibilities for further activity are limited only by the imagination and ingenuity of the people involved.

Note: Suggestions for improving this discussion guide are welcome. Use the “Contact Us” link at the top of this web page to submit them.