CHAPTER 1

Myth and Reality in American Politics

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Myths and American Government
   A. Functions of Myths

II. The Nature of Government and Politics
   A. Role of Government in American History

III. Fundamental Issues of Government and Politics
   A. Who Should Govern?
   B. Where Should Government Authority Be Vested?
   C. How Much Should Government Do?

IV. Overview of this Book

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Government is so pervasive in our lives that it needs no introduction. Its impact can be seen in almost all aspects of society. The news media broadcast daily the actions and inaction of government. If we tire of hearing the news, we still cannot escape the presence of government because it affects our income, welfare, security, and environment. Yet even though government should be a subject that is well known to us, it is not. Americans tend to love their country but resent and suspect their government. We criticize politicians and doubt government’s positive influence in our lives.

Despite the interplay between citizens and government, myths often compose what we believe about government. Dispelling some of those myths will increase our understanding of the institutions, processes, tensions, and goals of government. This textbook, particularly in Chapter 1, sheds light on American government. Myths are described in this chapter as stories, stereotypes, proverbial sayings, and pervasive attitudes that have an impact on the way we think about the world around us. This chapter will help you recognize myths and understand their consequences.

Chapter 1 first discusses the significance of myths for politics in the United States and then deals with some basic concepts and activities of government, providing you with terms and ideas that will help you as you read the text and complete the course. This introductory chapter raises three fundamental issues about politics: Who should govern? How much should government do? Where should government authority be vested? In the key terms printed in bold throughout the chapter, the authors have identified possible answers to those questions. As you prepare to read, you should be asking the same questions that the authors raise and wondering about what the answers will be.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After carefully reading and studying the chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define political myths and describe their significance in American government and politics.
2. Define government and differentiate it from politics.
3. Describe the changing role and importance of government in America.
4. Distinguish between the concepts of authority and power and describe different traditional views on who should hold each in the United States.

5. Define democracy and distinguish direct democracy from republic.

6. Discuss American responses to the question of where—at the local, state, or federal level—government authority should be vested.

7. Identify and understand the competing views on the proper role of government expressed by liberalism, conservatism, populism, and libertarianism.

**READING POLITICS & POPULAR CULTURE**

1. What is the message you get from viewing Grant Wood’s painting of George Washington confessing to having chopped down the cherry tree?

2. How do popular culture products that touch upon the subject of the 9/11 attacks, such as movies, books, songs, and video games, use myths to promote their messages and perspectives? (Stuck on an item to look at? Consider the following examples: United 93 and Fahrenheit 9/11 (movies), Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue (The Angry American)” and Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising” (music), the Department of Defense’s American Army (video game).

3. What role did the television coverage of Hurricane Katrina play in reinforcing negative views of government?

4. Do you think that cartoons, television, movies, music, etc., tend to promote different images of government because they are different types of media?

**PREPARING FOR AN EXAM**

**Essay Questions**

1. Who has the ability to influence government?

2. Who should govern? Describe several responses to that question in light of the concepts of political authority and of political power.

3. Describe how the myth of vulnerability has been shaped by 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Describe how these events and the government response has affected your view on the government’s role in your life.

4. List and define four different ideological opinions about how much government should do.

5. What are political myths, and how do they influence American government?

**ANSWER KEY**

**Reading Politics & Popular Culture**

1. Woods was probably making light of the myth of Washington always telling the truth. He put an adult head on the child Washington. He ridiculed the ways that mythic narration makes it appear that the individual was destined for greatness, discounting the amount of historical accident that went into Washington’s life. Woods is exposing and questioning this process.

2. There are, of course, multiple avenues of analysis for this exercise, but the attempt to pay attention to the ways that events are manipulated in popular culture offers an exercise in the appropriation of events for a variety of meanings; especially prominent are myths of vulnerability, mourning,
and revenge. Consider the extreme contrasts that can be found among popular culture portrayals of the same event.

3. Consider some of the following aspects to the question. Do the television images tell us the reality of the situation? How were government officials portrayed? How was bureaucratic work portrayed? How were police and military officials portrayed? What images were the most powerful?

4. Here are some things to think about when answering this question. How does visual perception change your perception of events, that is, do media differences such as camera perspective make a difference? Do the accounts of politics lyrically expressed in the music you listen to depend on style of music to facilitate the point? That is, does it make a difference whether the sound is punk or easy listening if the words are the same?

**Essay Questions**

1. Your answer should argue for one of the following and should be supported with specific examples:
   - Elites
   - Pluralist groups

2. Select one of the following as the answer to be supported and compare it to the other possible answers. Give specific examples to support your answer.
   - Democracy
   - Aristocracy
   - Monarchy

3. Make sure you address the following points:
   - History of vulnerability in America
   - The creation of the Department of Homeland Security
   - FEMA’s problems dealing with Hurricane Katrina
   - Your attitude toward government and the way new security measures impact your life.

4. Pick one of the following ideologies and demonstrate why you think it is the best. Give specific examples to support your choice.
   - Liberalism
   - Conservatism
   - Libertarianism
   - Populism

5. Address the following points:
   - Myths may be innocent falsehoods, or they may be serious distortions.
   - Myths simplify complex problems.
   - Myths help define our place.
Myths surround our most important institutions and people.
Myths help us organize and make sense of new information.