

# CRIMES AGAINST DEMOCRACY



HARRY WILSON

# Thom Hartmann On Voting Fraud And The Right-Wing Attack On The Middle Class

JIM GUINNESS

**LIKE** *many progressives, I became more active in politics during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign. Going online in search of alternatives to the mainstream coverage of the election, I came across plenty of articles by Thom Hartmann: about media manipulation by the candidates; about the possibility of vote tampering; and about how we can “restore democracy” in the U.S. I admired his unflinching attention to the worrisome details that others overlooked. (I’m not the only one. His reporting has earned a Project Censored award, for independent journalism on issues that are ignored by the major news media.)*

*A visit to Hartmann’s website ([www.thomhartmann.com](http://www.thomhartmann.com)) reveals a writing career that covers more than just politics: he’s written fourteen books, on topics ranging from spirituality to the environment to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In *We the People: A Call to Take Back America* (Coreway Media), Hartmann and illustrator Neil Cohn use a simple comic-book format to describe how corporations have come to dominate our government and culture. *The Prophet’s Way: A Guide to Living in the Now* (Park Street Press) earned Hartmann an invitation to a private audience with Pope John Paul II in 1998. *Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight* (Three Rivers Press), about our dwindling world oil supply, caught the attention of the Dalai Lama, who invited Hartmann to spend a week with him in Dharamsala, India, home of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Hartmann’s most recent book, *What Would Jefferson Do?* (Harmony), traces the history of democracy in the U.S. and includes specific recommendations for how we can rescue our system of government from corporate influence.*

*Born in 1951, Hartmann grew up in conservative, working-class Lansing, Michigan, and became involved in politics at a young age. When he was thirteen, he campaigned door-to-door for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Three*

years later, however, he was protesting against the Vietnam War.

Hartmann also started writing early in life. "By the time I was sixteen," he says, "my bedroom wall was papered with rejection slips, mostly for terrible poetry." Though he was a committed agnostic as a teenager, vivid experiences with spiritual teachers ignited an interest in nonscientific truths, and he briefly taught meditation himself. For ten years, Hartmann worked in radio as a DJ, news reporter, and program director. Then, in 1978, he left radio to open the New England Salem Children's Village, a residential treatment program for emotionally disturbed and abused children. He went on to work with the international Salem program, based in Europe, to set up famine-relief efforts, hospitals, and refugee centers in Africa, Europe, South America, and Asia. In 1997, Hartmann founded the Hunter School in New Hampshire, for children with ADHD. He has successfully started seven businesses, including an advertising agency, a publishing company, and an herbal-tea company.

Hartmann returned to radio two years ago with a nationally syndicated talk show, *The Thom Hartmann Program: Uncommon Sense from the Radical Middle*. In many markets, the show goes head-to-head with Rush Limbaugh in the noon-to-three time slot. In addition to being broadcast by radio stations across the country, it's available via the Sirius Satellite Radio system and on [RadioPower.org](http://RadioPower.org) and [WhiteRoseSociety.org](http://WhiteRoseSociety.org).

Hartmann seems to have mastered the talk-radio genre. Ready to engage with callers of any type, he has a head full of facts and figures, and an earnestness that suits the format. Unlike most talk-radio hosts, however, he seems never to get angry nor impugn anyone's character or motives. (He'll even give Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld the benefit of the doubt.)

Hartmann, who lived in Montpelier, Vermont, for the past decade, moved in April to Portland, Oregon, where he does a local morning talk-radio show in addition to his syndicated program. He and his wife, Louise, to whom he's been married for more than thirty years, have three grown children. When I interviewed him by telephone in early January 2005, he was still living in Montpelier. Throughout our conversation, Hartmann displayed a warmth and a sense of humor that were the equal of his probing thoughtfulness.

**Guinness:** The exit polls in the November 2004 presidential election heavily favored losing candidate John Kerry. A number of apparently unbiased commentators are saying that polls just aren't working anymore. Does that make sense?

**Hartmann:** No, it doesn't. We're being told by the media that we polled too many women, or we polled too early in the day, but they're grasping at straws. Is it a coincidence that exit-polling — a process that's been fine-tuned for fifty years and is considered so reliable that it's used to confirm the accuracy of elections in Third World countries — suddenly became inaccurate where electronic voting is widely used? Is it a coincidence that these were all close races that Republicans won, sometimes by upset? Is it a coincidence that, in the small number of counties where paper ballots were used, the difference between the polls and the actual vote was negligible?



**THOM HARTMANN**

Keep in mind, we've got some rather aggressive disinformation machines out there: the right-wing talk-radio machine, the Murdoch empire, the Moonie media machine of the *Washington Times* and United Press International, and the right-wing think tanks originally founded by Joe Coors and company. Nowadays even National Public Radio sounds more and more like mainstream media, because it's fighting for survival. Congress holds the purse strings, and the Right controls Congress these days.

**Guinness:** I've heard that nearly 20 percent of the American public doubts the result of the 2004 presidential election. Is there any evidence that the election was subject to fraud or significant irregularities?

**Hartmann:** Bev Harris, who operates the website [www.blackboxvoting.org](http://www.blackboxvoting.org), has been stubbornly pursuing confirmation of the election results in the Florida 2004 presidential election. She has gone county by county and asked to see evidence of the results. Counties that use optical scanners have poll tapes — printouts produced by each scanner on election day. In one county she was presented with tapes produced on November 15; she later found the real November 2 tapes in the garbage. In another county that used computerized voting, no government worker knew enough about the system to access any information for Harris. It turned out that an unidentified representative of the voting-machine company had been called in on election day to run the computer and tabulate the vote.

The unfortunate reality is that about 80 percent of the vote was either taken on or counted by computers that are programmed by private corporations, and these corporations say we have no business asking how they program their computers. These voting machines leave no paper trail. There's no way to audit them. There's no proof that if you push button A, the machine records A rather than B.

**Guinness:** We're just taking their word for it, in other words, that our votes are being accurately recorded.

**Hartmann:** Yes. It's faith-based voting. In Ohio they did a

recount of votes recorded on punch cards or fill-in-the-blank ballots, but they counted only 3 percent. The other 97 percent we just have to hope was recorded accurately.

So the real question is: how do we know that we actually elected the people whom these private corporations say we elected? This is the real felony against democracy: the privatization of our voting system. I mean, if the Bush administration wants to privatize the concession stands at Yellowstone so that some corporation can profit off them, it's somewhere between bad taste and abuse of power, but it's not a crime against democracy. To privatize the vote, though, the beating heart of democracy — that is a crime.

**Guinness:** How long has electronic voting been going on?

**Hartmann:** It started to become widespread about fifteen years ago. But election fraud has always been with us. The challenge is to develop voting methods that are less vulnerable to fraud. Instead we've created a system that's *more* vulnerable, because there's no paper trail, and because it can be hacked: somebody can go in and change the information that's stored in the computer. According to Congressman John Conyers Jr., that's exactly what happened in Ohio in December 2004, weeks *after* the election: representatives of the voting-machine company made alterations to punch-card tabulators before the recount, apparently to ensure that the recount would match the initial results.

**Guinness:** Are the companies that control the voting machines all strongly Republican?

**Hartmann:** I wouldn't say all of them, but certainly the high-visibility ones are. In 1996 Republican Congressman Chuck Hagel won an upset victory in a Nebraska Senate race in which votes were counted by machines designed and maintained by a company he headed. He went on to win reelection in 2002 with an unheard-of 83 percent of the vote.

If there were random errors with electronic voting, we would expect to find that the mistakes went sometimes in one party's favor, sometimes in the other's. Instead almost all the errors have proven to be in favor of the Republican candidates, with hundreds of votes going their way for every one mistake in favor of the Democrats.

**Guinness:** If the people in office are the ones who set up this voting system, how can it be fixed?

**Hartmann:** History tells us that the way citizens take back power, whether it be in 1776 or 2005, is by speaking out. Americans need to tell elected officials that we will not tolerate private corporations counting our vote in secret. We will not tolerate media that tell us only part of the truth. We want the government to enforce the Sherman Antitrust Act, which made it illegal for a single board of trustees to control numerous corporations, fix prices, and manipulate markets. That law constrained the power of capital in such a way that it still produced wealth, but also accomplished social good and didn't corrupt government.

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the Sherman Act. Lack of enforcement led to a merger-and-acquisition mania, which led to the end of journalism as we once knew it. And as the Founders said: without an independent press, you can't have a functional democracy. And how can you have an independent press when a handful of corporations control everything we see, hear, and read? We need to break up media conglomerates. We need to go back to a time when if you wanted to own a radio station or a television station or a newspaper, you actually had to live in the community it served.

**Guinness:** When I was growing up, I was taught that the Russian people couldn't think for themselves because they were subject to constant propaganda by their government. You seem to be suggesting that we're in not such a different situation in the United States today.

**Hartmann:** I was in Russia when it was the Soviet Union, and I was in East Berlin when it was East Germany, and the people there were not dumb, uneducated cattle. The reality is that there were strong underground movements, and most citizens were well-informed — probably better informed than many Americans — precisely because they were so oppressed. We shouldn't underestimate the role of these underground movements in bringing down the Soviet Union.

**Guinness:** So it's not true what the conservatives claim: that Ronald Reagan's military and economic policies are responsible for the fall of communism?

**Hartmann:** Reagan can't take any credit for the fall of communism. Back in the 1960s the CIA was saying the Soviet Union could implode at any time. The Soviets couldn't feed

their people. Their economic system just didn't work, because it was overlaid with a political autocracy, and autocracies have always self-destructed.

By the 1970s, the CIA was on a death watch. The hope was that the Soviet Union would go down quietly rather than violently, as societies often do. But its eventual collapse had nothing to do with Ronald Reagan. In fact, it happened on the watch of George Herbert Walker Bush. This whole idea that Reagan is responsible for the fall of the Soviet Union is revisionist history on the part of conservatives who want to elevate to sainthood one of our worst presidents. He declared war on the middle class. He drove up the largest debt we'd ever had (until George W. Bush came along). And thirty-two members of his administration were convicted of felonies — more than in any other administration in the history of the United States.

**Guinness:** So there was an active underground movement in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. To put it bluntly, are people in the U.S. too comfortable and satisfied and addicted to TV for that ever to happen here?

**Hartmann:** Actually, I think people are too frightened and too deep in debt. The problem is not that Americans are overfed and entertained to death. The problem is that nearly thirty years of conservative economic policies have wiped out most of the good jobs, exported most of our industries, and created the kind of Dickensian world that the conservatives want.

I think we find ourselves in a situation similar to the one I saw in Russia back in the 1970s and 1980s: it wasn't that the average Russian was politically sophisticated, but that there was enough of an activist subculture to provide the basis for a movement. And here we have 20 percent of adults who think that the election was stolen: the people who read CommonDreams.org on the Web, the people who read *The Sun*, the people who listen to progressive talk radio. These people are forwarding e-mails to each other, doing what the pamphleteers who sparked the American Revolution did in 1773.

**Guinness:** Some observers are predicting that the growth of China and India will bring on an era of reduced U.S. influence in world affairs. Will that have an effect on democratic institutions at home?

**Hartmann:** No, there's no relationship between the two, in my mind. There is a relationship, however, between the imperialistic policies of the United States and the decline of the middle class. If you look at the history of great empires, you'll see they fall because they overextend themselves. They pour money into their military and into external expansion in search of resources, rather than building their internal infrastructure: their educational systems, their agricultural systems, their industrial systems. We're going down that road very quickly right now, thanks to the neoconservative agenda. It's fashionable to use the word *empire* again, you know. That's an end-stage indicator for a nation. I just hope we haven't gone

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so far that we can't step back from the edge.

**Guinness:** Do you think many Americans have a sense that something is wrong?

**Hartmann:** Pretty much everybody knows *something* is wrong. They know that they have to work harder every year to make ends meet. The problem is most people haven't figured out that the destruction of the middle class is a result of politics. And they haven't made that connection in part because those voices that would help them make that connection have, shall we say, not been exalted by the corporate media.

The golden age of the middle class — when a single wage earner could raise a family, pay all the medical expenses, take a vacation every year, and also have enough for retirement — was a direct result of the Sherman Antitrust Act, and also the Wagner Act of 1935, which guaranteed the right of workers to organize. Prior to the Sherman Act, we were in the Gilded Age, a period of poverty for the many and great wealth for the few. And what we've seen since Reagan and the rise of conservative economics is a rapid return to Gilded Age economics. Karl Rove, George W. Bush's senior advisor, is always talking about his admiration for the William McKinley administration, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the country had a large working-class population struggling to care for kids and avoid eviction. The conservative agenda is about creating a similarly desperate, terrified, powerless, politically impotent working class that won't put up much of a fight and doesn't have the time to become educated about politics.

*(end of excerpt)*