



# Give Me A Break

*How I Exposed Hucksters, Cheats, and Scam Artists and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media*

by John Stossel

(Harper Collins, 2004: \$24.95)

Reviewed by Neil Hrab

Acrobats, NASCAR drivers, rodeo clowns—three of the world’s most dangerous professions. Today, given doomsayers’ reaction when someone questions their pronouncements, we could add the occupation of “skeptic” to this list. Witness the public pillory of Bjørn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (and winner of CEI’s Julian Simon Award for 2003). As the Cato Institute’s Steve Hanke notes, the campaign against Lomborg proves “what any fighter pilot knows: that when you start receiving flak, you know you are over the target.”

By this standard, ABC News correspondent John Stossel is one heck

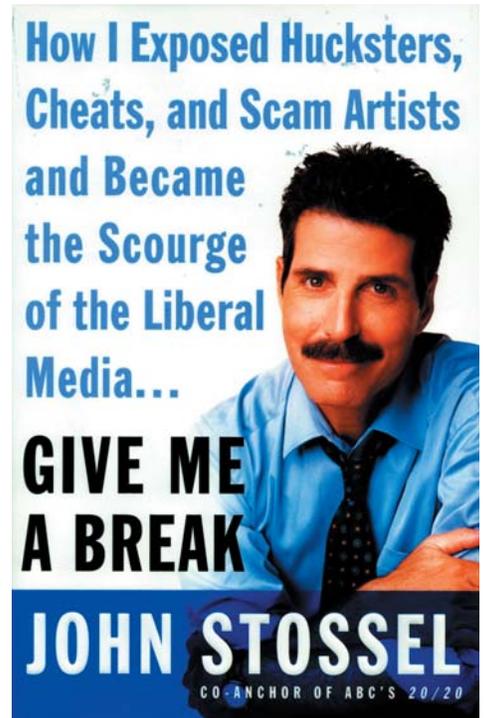
I have ever encountered”—apparently incensed by Stossel’s exposés of how government regulations hurt the very consumers they were designed to protect. Stossel’s willingness to question conventional wisdom led TV columnist Gail Pennington to dub him “America’s best-known skeptic.”

In his first book, *Give Me a Break: How I Exposed Hucksters, Cheats, and Scam Artists and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media*, Stossel details his intellectual odyssey as a reporter. Early in his career, he shared the fashionable skepticism against private corporations that permeates many newsrooms. As a consumer reporter, he covered

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of a fighter pilot. Environmentalists loudly denounce him for questioning their claims that the world is careening towards ruin. Organic farming advocates attack Stossel for arguing that organic food is no safer or more nutritious than normal fare. And drug war supporters assail him for questioning the wisdom of imprisoning non-violent drug offenders. Stossel has even drawn the ire of Ralph Nader, who called Stossel “the most dishonest mass-media journalist

things like deceptive practices in the cosmetics industry and price-fixing by grocery stores and milk wholesalers. “For years, I bought the stereotypes that serve as conventional wisdom in the news business: Corporations are evil; all risk is intolerable; consumers need more government to protect us,” he writes. “I went on to do a thousand stories on high-pressure car salesmen, rip-offs by various businesses, medical breakthroughs, and other assorted



scams.”

However, after some reflection and study, Stossel began to doubt the conventional wisdom, and to question the supposed beneficial effects of government regulation and intervention.

*It’s embarrassing how long it took me to see the damage regulators do. The taxes that pay their salaries and build their offices are the least of it. The bigger harm is the indirect cost, all the money businesses spend trying to wade through the red tape (lobbying, filling out forms, hiring lawyers), plus the damage the regulation does to the American spirit. So much creativity now goes not into inventing things, but into gaming the system, manipulating the regulatory leviathan.*

Stossel took to his new mission with gusto. TV critic James Endrst once observed: “A lot of John Stossel’s stories are hard to believe. That’s what makes them so good. And so maddening.” *Give Me A Break* does not disappoint: It’s packed with dozens of hard-to-believe stories and groan-inducing quotes.

For example, on a show on the effects



of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Stossel asked Clinton-era Equal Employment Opportunity Commission head Gilbert Casellas to what degree regulations forbid employers from asking disability-related questions when hiring. Casellas boasted that the rules are crystal-clear; “none of this stuff is rocket science,” he said. Stossel decided to test this. He asked Casellas, “If you come to me applying for a job, and your arm is in a sling, can I ask you why your arm is in a sling?” At that point, Casellas asked for Stossel to stop taping so he could consult an assistant. After five minutes of conferring, the camera came back on. Stossel repeated his question. Casellas responded, “You can ask me whether I can do the job.” Stossel pointed out that Casellas had to ask an assistant “what the rule is.” Casellas said he had to confer “because you asked me a specific question, about a specific situation.” So much for Casellas’ claims that “none of this stuff is rocket science.”

Stossel’s ability to dig up bizarre, yet humorous examples to make his point is only part of the reason for his popularity. The straightforward, almost folksy way in which he tells stories endears him to viewers, whom he addresses directly. He once told an interviewer: “I behave as I do when I’m talking to friends and family. I try to sort out the more pompous language that comes to me in the form of research...and convert that to plain talk.” Stossel writes in this same folksy style. His book not only entertains with its revelations about the author’s life, career, motivations, and philosophy, but also provides a good example of how to communicate effectively and concisely.

Another reason for Stossel’s popularity—which also comes through in the book—is his insistence on always asking questions. Many journalists, by positioning themselves as “experts,” unintentionally come across as dour know-it-alls. Stossel avoids this pitfall by asking questions rather than reciting conclusions, and by keeping his tongue firmly in cheek. (In one self-effacing moment, he even acknowledges that some people he meets confuse him with his former “20/20” colleague Geraldo Rivera.) “I don’t claim to have all the answers,” he writes. As the book and Stossel’s ABCNews specials show, having

all the answers is often less important than knowing the right questions to ask. Thus, his broadcasts, rather than dryly reciting facts, work as engaging dialogues in which he and the viewers discover certain things together. This same rhetorical style comes through in *Give Me A Break*, making it a very enjoyable read.

It will sound strange to his fans, but there was a time when Stossel was not sure how long he could continue his skeptical odyssey. He once said that pointing out the unintended consequences of government does not always “make for good television, and I’m finding [such stories] very difficult

to do.” But that was in 1994. Fortunately for the state of public debate in America, he kept going.

Today, even some of Stossel’s most outspoken critics admit the man has a certain charm, his almost heretical views notwithstanding. For instance, *Chicago Tribune* TV critic Steve Johnson blithely dismisses Stossel’s ideas as “nuts,” but he credits Stossel for being a “provocative and engaging” journalist. No fan of Stossel will want to miss this provocative book.

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## CEI Board Member Leonard Liggió Receives International Award of Liberty from Italy’s *Società Libera*

Italy’s *Società Libera*, an organization dedicated to promoting classical liberal ideas, has awarded its **International Award of Liberty** to Professor Leonard P. Liggió, Executive Vice President of the **Atlas Economic Research Foundation** and Board Member of the **Competitive Enterprise Institute**, for his contributions in promoting liberal culture.



A prestigious jury composed of leading figures of Italian civil society—including two judges from the board of RAI (Italy’s state run TV channel); professors from the universities of Milan, Rome, and Bologna, and Bocconi University; and the *Corriere della Sera* (Italy’s leading newspaper)—made the award selection.

The award will be given **June 21, 2004** at a ceremony to be televised by RAI on prime time.

According to the director of *Società Libera*, **Vincenzo Olita**, the practice of liberalism, understood as a system of freedom and responsibility, faces big barriers to become accepted in local communities. For this reason, *Società Libera* tries to reward those in the areas of scientific research, economics, and culture who have given testimony to the values of responsibility and liberty. In the area of culture, *Società Libera* regards the contributions of **Karl Popper, F.A. Hayek, Bruno Leoni, Carl Menger, and Dario Antiseri** as the guide for the award. We congratulate Leonard for this merited award and the judges for their wisdom.

give me a break unknown. Take it easy on me. cut me some slack. "The accident wasn't my fault, so give me a break." #let it go #leave me alone #don't bust my chops #cut me some slack #get off my back. by jabbablaz January 13, 2014. 84. 10. Get a give me a break mug for your barber Callisto. Trending RN - May 21, 2020. 1. HNGH. Give me a break definition: said to show that you think that someone is being very annoying or ridiculous | Meaning, pronunciation, translations and examples. Give me a break. If you look at the charts now, the 14-year-olds are more like 16 and 17-year-olds. said to tell someone to stop criticizing or annoying you and leave you alone. Anxious families yesterday begged the youngsters, 'Give us a break', after they wrecked dozens of cars. Easy Learning Idioms Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers. Definition of Give me a break! in the Idioms Dictionary. Give me a break! phrase. What does Give me a break! expression mean? Definitions by the largest Idiom Dictionary. I just need someone at this company to give me a break. I'll take any job here, even cleaning the bathrooms. 2. A plea for someone else to stop doing something annoying or troublesome. Guys, I told you I needed you to be quiet for five minutes while I made a call, and you couldn't even do it for 10 seconds! Give me a break, will you? 3. A scoffing retort to something that seems unbelievable or ridiculous. You, the night owl, are getting up at 5 AM tomorrow? Give me a break! See also: break, give. Give me a break! and Gimme a break! 1. Inf. Don't be so harsh to me!