

The Double Helix of Freedom, Al Gore, a series of extracts from *The Assault on Reason: How the Politics of Fear, Secrecy and Blind Faith Subvert Wise Decision-Making, Degrade Democracy and Imperil America and the World*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2007

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and America's Declaration of Independence were published in the same year. In both, men were understood to be units of independent judgment, capable of making decision upon the basis of freely available information, the collective result being the wisest possible allocations of wealth (in the case of the former, work) and political power (in the case of the latter).

Capitalism and democracy shared the same internal logic: Free markets and representative and representative democracy were both assumed to operate best when individuals made rational decision—whether they were buying and selling property or accepting and rejecting propositions. Both works took for granted the existence of a public sphere defined by the printed word to which all literate individuals had equal access. And both shared a common enemy: despotic rulers capable of using arbitrary power to confiscate property and restrict liberty.

The internal structure of liberty is a double helix: One strand—political freedom—spirals upward in tandem with the other strand—economic freedom. But the two strands, though intertwined, must remain separate in order for the structure of freedom to maintain its integrity. If political and economic freedoms have been siblings in the history of liberty, it is the incestuous coupling of wealth and power that poses the deadliest threat to democracy. If wealth can be easily exchanged for power, then the concentration of either can double the corrupting potential of both. Freedom's helix then spirals downward toward unhealthy combinations of concentrated political and economic power.

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The last two centuries have demonstrated the superiority of free market economies over centralized economies and the superiority of democracy over forms of government that concentrate power in the hands of a few. In both cases, the root of that superiority lies in the flow of information.

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The metaphor of massive parallelism, or “distributed intelligence,” offers an explanation for why our representative democracy is superior to a governmental system run by a dictator or a king. Where totalitarian regimes rely on a “central processor” to dictate all commands, representative democracies depend on the power and insight of people spread throughout the society, each located adjacent to the part of the society in which he or she is most interested.

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A government for and of the people is supposed to be generally open to public scrutiny by the people—while the private information of the people themselves should be routinely protected from government intrusion. This administration has turned the fundamental presumption of our democracy on its head. And, in the end, its assaults on our core democratic principles have left us less free and less secure.

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There are scientific warnings now of another onrushing catastrophe. We were warned of an imminent attack by al-Qaeda; we didn't respond. We were warned the

levees would break in New Orleans; we didn't respond. Now the scientific community is warning us of the worst catastrophe in the history of human civilization.

Two thousand scientists in a hundred countries, engaged in the most elaborate, well-organized scientific collaboration in the history of humankind, have long since produced a consensus that we will face a string of terrible catastrophes unless we act to prepare ourselves and deal with the underlying causes of global warming. In February 2007, this group—the IPCC—further strengthened its consensus to say there is a 90 percent probability that humans are responsible for global warming.

It is important to learn the lessons of what happens when scientific evidence and clear authoritative warnings are ignored—in order to induce our leaders not to do it again, not to ignore the scientists and leave us unprotected in the face of those threats that are facing us right now.

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This is not a political issue. This is a moral issue. It affects the survival of human civilization. It is not a question of Left vs. Right; it is a question of right vs. wrong. Put simply, it is wrong to destroy the habitability of our planet and ruin the prospects of every generation that follows ours.

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