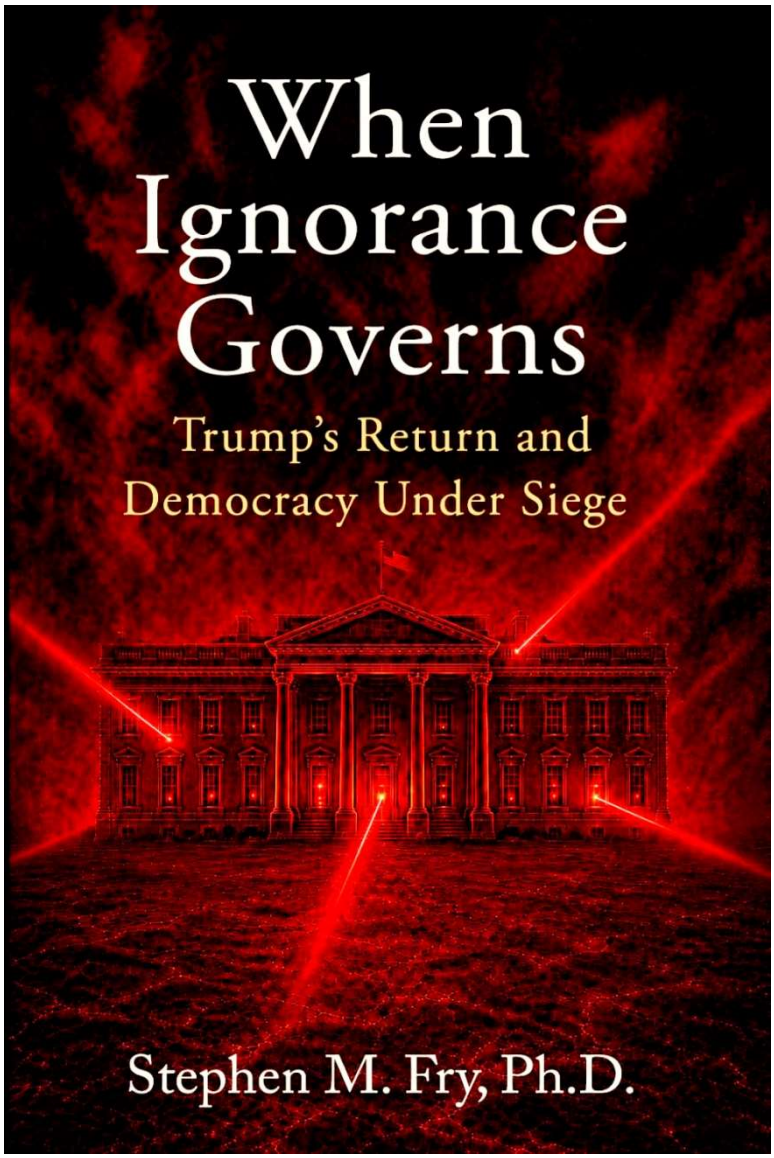
BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

Stephen Fry examines how ignorance became political power

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"When Ignorance Governs: Trump's Return and Democracy Under Siege" by Stephen M. Fry. El Dorado Hills, CA: SBDI Publishing, 2026, 420 pages, $21.99 (paperback).



"It is tempting to treat Trump's political career as a simple story of individual deception: a leader lies, supporters believe him, opponents object, and the country divides over what is true," Stephen M. Fry explains in "When Ignorance Governs: Trump's Return and Democracy Under Siege," the latest salvo in his ongoing war against the perils of empowering ineptitude. "Trump's dishonesty has always mattered, yet his power depends on the system built around it. Hyper-partisan television hosts present investigations and legal consequences as partisan attacks on Trump and his movement. Members of Congress decline to correct claims they know are false. Influencers turn outrage into identity, while donors and activists accept democratic damage as the price of achieving policy goals. Lawyers give grievance the appearance of legal legitimacy. The system is sustained by voters who have been taught to distrust any institution capable of contradicting the preferred narrative."

"This is how ignorance becomes political power," Fry continues. "The issue is not intelligence or access to information, but whether correction is still possible. Trump's supporters include many intelligent and sincere people, with legitimate grievances against institutions that have failed them, ignored them, condescended to them, or governed poorly. Weaponized ignorance begins when those grievances become grounds for rejecting inconvenient evidence, binding identity to falsehood, and treating correction as betrayal. Under those conditions, facts lose their ordinary democratic function. Evidence no longer settles a dispute; it is treated as a weapon used by enemies."

So begins one of the most powerful and overwhelming indictments of the modern state of affairs I have had occasion to peruse in recent memory. Fry is masterful and meticulous in both how he lays out his core thesis as well as how he backs up virtually every claim made in this enlightening and damning analysis of how we arrived at the ridiculousness that has come to define the contemporary political and cultural environment in which we find ourselves submerged. More than any other author currently grappling with the same subject matter, Fry is driven by an uncompromising

pursuit of truth as a fundamental and overarching guiding principle instead of a thinly veiled attempt to advocate a preferred ideology, which unfortunately too often characterizes similar efforts.

One of the more exhaustively researched tomes (and clocking in at 420 pages, it definitely earns the moniker), the book contains 52 pages of chapter references and 16 pages of a selected bibliography after the introduction, 19 chapters and an afterward comprising the main text. Structurally, the book is arranged in four sections: Part I: From Warning to Reality, which consists of the first two chapters; Part II: The Machinery of Loyalty, the next four chapters; Part III: The Government of Grievance, chapters 7 through 11; Part IV: Institutions Under Stress, chapters 12 through 17; and Part V: The 2026 Test, consisting of the final two chapters. Fry's literary style is both conversational as well as authoritative; he has the somewhat unique – at least in my humble opinion – gift of being able to convey complex ideas in a manner instantly decipherable by a general audience. He is also adept at fleshing out his central argument in a powerful and evidence-based approach - making his line of reasoning difficult to dismiss.

One of the key concepts winding its way through Fry's treatise is the idea of taking actions intentionally fabricated to illicit a specific response in those who happen to witness the event. Fry exposes and expands upon this tactic particularly well in "Spectacle Over Governance," the ninth chapter and one that especially spoke to me:

"Spectacle politics is powerful because it makes government emotionally legible," he observes. "Budgets, rulemaking, court injunctions, personnel classifications, and regulatory reviews are complicated, technical, or slow. A signed executive order, a line of troops, a raid, a confrontation, a renamed institution, or a viral insult can be understood instantly. It tells supporters who is strong, who is weak, who is winning, and who is being punished. That clarity is especially useful for a movement organized around grievance."

"Immigration is one of the most obvious arenas for spectacle governance because images of raids, arrests, detention, troops, checkpoints, and confrontation carry immediate emotional force," Fry continues a few paragraphs later. "They turn a complex policy field into a visual drama of invasion and rescue. Immigration law involves statutes, courts, asylum rules, humanitarian obligations, labor markets, local communities, due process, federalism, and foreign policy. Spectacle compresses all of that into a simpler image: the government finally taking control… Spectacle politics, however, turns a difficult administrative challenge into a visual test of strength. Immigrants become symbols of invasion, cities of lawlessness, local officials of defiance, federal agents of order, and protesters of disorder. The drama remains emotionally clear even when the policy reality does not."

Fry has a BS in Physics, a MS in Electrical Engineering, and a PhD in Quantum Electronics (all from UCLA) as well as an MBA in Financial Analysis from National University. He has published dozens of scientific papers as well as nine books on medical terminology. Some readers may be familiar with "Air Travel Adventures: Tales of a 5 Million Miler," in which he describes some of his travel escapades, including meeting former president George Bush and being on one of the last planes to land at National Airport on the morning of 9/11. His other books in the present genre include "Weaponization of Ignorance: How Lies and Misinformation Divided America," which I reviewed in the March 22, 2026, edition of the Bowling Green Daily News, and "The Integrity Gap: When Good Intentions Undermine Truth: A Field Guide to the Political Meme Ecosystem." In his spare time, he runs marathons and is an expert-level downhill skier. He resides in California with his wife Cindy and their border collie Graham.

In addition to laying out the extent of the dilemmas that lie just around the corner, as well as the existential dangers they represent, in the final analysis he is guardedly optimistic in his prognosis for our collective future. What we have to be vigilant about is not normalizing and becoming desensitized to the quagmire all around us as we seek to return to some semblance of sanity over the next few years. He highlights the responsibility we all share in "What Citizens Must Refuse to Normalize," the final chapter:

“One of the most dangerous habits citizens can adopt is cynical equivalence: the reflex that every scandal is the same, every party equally corrupt, every prosecution political, every media outlet dishonest, every court partisan, every official self-interested, and nothing worth defending. Cynicism presents itself as sophistication, but in practice it protects abuse. If everyone is equally guilty, no one is accountable. If every institution is equally corrupt, no institution can correct anything. If every fact is partisan, evidence loses meaning.”

I could not agree more. Another one to add to your reading list if you are concerned about where our country seems to be headed these days. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.