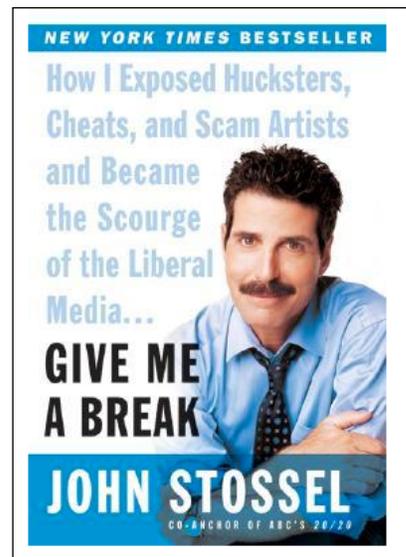

Truth Still Wins

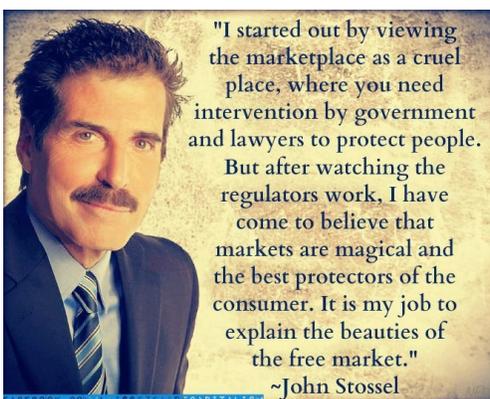
Book Report: “Give Me a Break: How I Exposed Hucksters, Cheats, Scam Artists and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media”

by John Stossel (2004)



[Robin Spielberger](#) - September 17, 2014

As a pioneering investigative consumer reporter, for 15 years [John Stossel](#) aired a thousand stories on scams, product dangers, and frauds. His work prompted government investigations, led to the creation of consumer protection departments, and earned him numerous broadcast reporting awards such as the [George Polk Award](#) for Outstanding Local Reporting and the [George Foster Peabody Award](#). He has also been honored five times for his excellence in consumer reporting by the [National Press Club](#) and has received a total of 19 [Emmys](#), as well as with the admiration of his peers.



But then something curious happened. As he writes in New York Times Bestseller, [Give Me a Break](#) (HarperCollins, 2004), "the more I watched the regulators work, the more it seemed the real beneficiaries of the regulations were entrenched businesses, unions, and the regulators themselves.

In [Give Me a Break](#), subtitled “How I Exposed Hucksters, Cheats, and Scam Artists and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media,” Stossel explains the story of his “professional and intellectual journey.”

“I was once a heroic consumer reporter; now I’m a threat to journalism” stated Stossel, veteran [ABC-News](#) newsmen and free-market champion in the first line of his book, [Give Me a Break](#). What happened that changed the opinion of Stossel’s peers where they no longer consider him a hero but a threat? He continues:

As a consumer reporter, I exposed con men and thieves, confronting them with hidden camera footage that unmasked their lies, put some out of business, and helped send the worst of them to jail. The [Dallas Morning News](#) called me the “bravest and best of television’s consumer reporters.” [Marvin Kitman](#) of [Newsday](#) said I was “the man who makes ‘em squirm,” whose “investigations of the unjust and wicked ... are models.” [Jonathan Mandell](#) of the [New York Daily News](#) quoted a [WCBS](#) official who “proudly” said, “No one’s offended more people than John Stossel.” Ah, “proudly.” Those were the days. My colleagues liked it when I offended people. They called my reporting “hard-hitting,” “a public service....Then I did a terrible thing. Instead of just applying my skepticism to business, I applied it to government and “public interest” groups. This apparently violated a religious tenet of journalism. Suddenly I was no longer “objective.” (p. 1-2)

Once known for his investigative reporting exposing scams in business, John Stossel had turned to the biggest business of all – the government – and found his fan base transformed into his loudest critics. “I saw the effect on my colleagues when I embraced freedom and the free markets. A [St. Louis Dispatch](#) [now the [St. Louis Post -Dispatch](#)] columnist actually asked me ‘When did you go to the dark side?’” Stossel stated in an article entitled “[Give Me a Break!](#)” in the Spring 2004 “[Cato’s Letter – A Quarterly Message on Liberty](#),” published by the [Cato Institute](#).

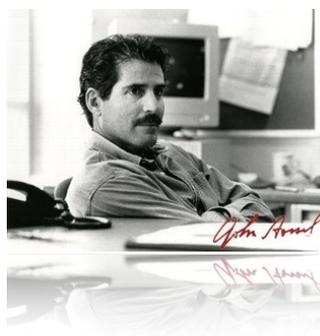
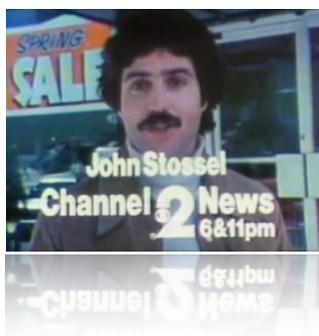
Throughout the chapters of [Give Me a Break](#), Stossel regales the reader with anecdotes from his career in an honest and entertaining way, exposing his own flaws and hypocrisies along with the targets of his criticisms. He recounts the stories of his days as an intern at [KGW](#) in Portland, Oregon, as consumer advocate reporter, busting businesses for [WCBS-TV](#) in New York City, and as the [20/20](#) presence, outing governmental shenanigans.

He first made his fame as an “in-your-face” investigative reporter on New York television who went after con artists, crooks, and corrupt businessmen. Stossel tracked them down and exposed their rip-offs of innocent and often naïve consumers. What struck him was their total amorality, as reflected in their wanton ability to lie right into the camera with no remorse or apparent sense of guilt.

In the pages of [Give Me a Break](#), Stossel also reveals his battles to get his ideas to the public, his struggle to overcome stuttering, and his eventual realization that, for years, much of his reporting missed the point. Along the way, he noticed that as networks screamed about the dangers of coffeepots and BIC lighters, there was something far more troublesome going on and worse risks were being ignored. Stossel even confesses his own role in contributing to the media hysteria over risk and profits by saying:

For most of my career, I was part of the problem. I reported on statistically insignificant threats -- poisonous lawn chemicals, exploding coffeemakers. Crusading lawyers and environmental activists got me to do stories frightening people about secondhand smoke and suggesting that Hartz Mountain flea collars were killing kittens and puppies. I took the "safety" lawyers and environmentalists at their word. They were the good guys out to serve the public. By contrast, business was run by men in suits who would do just about anything to get rich. It took me too long to realize that the activists have selfish agendas, too. (p. 74)

Many of the topics covered in [Give Me a Break](#) are familiar to those who have seen his [ABC News Specials](#), such as “[Mr. Stossel Goes to Washington](#)” and “[Are We Scaring Ourselves To Death](#)” (which was originally titled “Scaring Ourselves to Death.” ABC changed the title of the Special because it didn’t think consumers would watch a show about risk assessment, and suggested that Stossel do something “on diet, or breast implants—something we know people will watch”). However, Stossel insisted on moving forward with “Scaring Ourselves to Death” and [Alan Wurtzel](#), the research director for ABC at the time [Give Me a Break](#) was written, conceded. His only stipulation was that the title was changed to “Are We Scaring Ourselves to Death?”. At the end of that particular ABC Special, Stossel told the producers that he wanted to explain to the audience that “regulation itself can make life less safe by stifling innovation,” but two of the producers “angrily objected,” saying that “No respectable journalist would say that. We must point out that some regulations are great.” After Stossel received permission to move forward with his version of the Special, those two producers quit. Although the show received a record 17 million viewers and over 3000 letters thanking the network for having the guts to tell the truth on television, Stossel’s peers were beginning to doubt his sanity and further question his objectivity. As Stossel stated, “this marked the beginning of the second phase of my career. I was no longer the heroic consumer reporter. Now I was a traitor to journalism.”



“When I began my career as a consumer reporter, I had an obvious agenda: Businesses cheat consumers! Government must regulate them! Here I am when I still won Emmy awards: But when I wised up about the problems with government, my bosses resisted, and I stopped receiving Emmy Awards.”

[Give Me a Break](#) also includes the article “[Confessions of a Welfare Queen](#),” made famous by a reprint in [Reason Magazine](#) and numerous stories on topics ranging from Junk Science and Junk Reporting, Free Speech, Crack Babies, Panhandlers, Media Bias, Free Markets, and The Trouble with Lawyers that Stossel uses in hopes to explain his odyssey as a reporter and as an American who found a “new” way of thinking that wasn’t “left” and it wasn’t “right.”

"If you leave people alone, they will, without planning or intervention, create the system that benefits everyone most," Stossel writes. "This is because in a free market, every exchange is voluntary. You're always trading something you have for something you want more. It's a win-win proposition. Otherwise, why would anyone trade?"

A revolutionary idea -- 200 years ago, when [Adam Smith](#) wrote it. In 21st-century America, it's news.

John Stossel has experienced the wrath of all three anti-market forces working against the establishment and maintenance of economic freedom of which [Adam Smith](#) warned us in the eighteenth century. In Smith's first book, [The Theory of Moral Sentiments](#), he warned of the arrogance and danger of what he called “the man of system,” someone who considers people to be nothing more than pawns on the chessboard of society to be moved about to fit his own ideological ideal and plans.

Rather quickly, Stossel came face to face with Adam Smith's “man of system,” the ideological social engineer. He uncovered the twisting of facts justifying the regulation and control over such things as consumer choice, market-driven production decisions, and the environment. His exposés resulted in an avalanche of accusations that he was in the pockets of business interests and that he was against the poor and the societal good.

In [The Wealth of Nations](#), Smith lamented what he called the other two forces hindering the preservation of economic freedom: “the prejudices of the public” and “the power of the interests.” By the prejudices of the public, Smith meant the difficulty that many people have in following the logical arguments of the advocates of freedom, and the ease with which they fall victim to the appeals of those who promise short-run political favors and privileges at the expense of longer-run liberty and prosperity.

Stossel soon faced the “prejudices of the public” when he began to receive hate mail from viewers of his television specials demanding that he be fired, killed, or, at the very least, exiled. How could he question the good intentions of the government or the desirable results of regulations?

By “power of the interests,” Smith was referring to the influence of special groups who receive political benefits from the government in the form of regulations and subsidies at the expense of the rest of the society, such as lobbyists. Smith warned that they will use all the means at their disposal to destroy those who threaten the continuance of their privileges.

Stossel came face-to-face with the “power of the interests” as unions, business interests, and professional associations (that function off of taxpayers dollars through the government) attacked him as a vile and dangerous threat to the everyman and the betterment of America. In addition, the politicians and bureaucrats whose anti-competitive policies he placed in the public eye tried to censor his television specials.

However, in spite of the most determined attempts to gag him or to have him removed from his high-profile position, Stossel has persevered. His television specials unmasking leftist ideologies and uncovering myths and lies as well as the the abuse of political power have had consistently high ratings.

Page after page of [Give Me a Break](#) recounts the details of his encounters with politically corrupt businessmen and power-hungry bureaucrats. Stossel exposes the fraudulent methods used to spread

myths and create fears about the extent of poverty and the quality of life in America and the safety of products available to the average citizen in the marketplace. Stossel also highlights the absolute contempt for the rights of others shown by those who use the state for their own purposes, just as Smith warned.

I agree with the many reviewers who state that those who subscribe to the tenets of libertarianism (free markets, small government, and less government regulation) would find [Give Me a Break](#) most enjoyable. However, I would go a step farther and say that Stossel presents a intriguing, clever, and amiable argument for free markets, free speech, and deregulation that could serve as an entertaining primer for those who have seen Stossel on television and don't know much about libertarianism, as well as those who are open to learning a "new" way of thinking in order to address the sociopolitical issues facing the us today.

[Give Me a Break](#) doesn't offer a detailed, reasoned argument to sway thinkers or explain the historical ideology of libertarianism, but through an anecdotal journey of his encounters with politically corrupt businessmen and power-thirsty bureaucrats, Stossel provides an introduction to the beneficial powers of free markets, free speech, and personal responsibility without resorting to the Michael Moore or Ann Coulter polemics used to rouse the rabble or enrage the masses. He even offers kind words to the government and contemporary society, noting that America was remarkably open and free even while we were moving to a "nanny state." In the ten years that have passed since he wrote [Give Me a Break](#), Stossel has explained numerous times on his weekly [Fox News](#) libertarian show called "[Stossel](#)" and during regular appearances on the Fox News Channel that he believes America has, in fact, entered into a big government "nanny state."

Stossel ends his first book, [Give Me a Break](#), with a series of clear, crisp chapters defending the logic and benefits of the free market, the importance of personal and civil liberties, and the underlying

value of freedom. There is a long and honorable tradition of U.S. journalists with definite points of view who hoped that their reporting would have a political impact--from Thomas Paine to Ida Tarbell to I.F. Stone--and John Stossel's journey in the world of television journalism is proof that truth can win out.