

A Populist Manifesto

Parts One and Two

REVIEWED BY PETER B. GEMMA

Lou Dobbs is an unlikely proponent of a populist, antiestablishment agenda. A Harvard University graduate with a degree in economics, Dobbs is a bestselling author and a columnist for *Money* magazine and *U.S. News & World Report*, and hosts public policy television shows which have earned him two Emmy awards, one for “lifetime achievement in broadcasting.” This self-identified “lifelong Republican and a strong believer in free enterprise” has received many honors from sources ranging from the *Wall Street Journal* to the Organization for the Rights of American Workers, which lauded him as Man of the Year.

Dig a little deeper into Dobbs’s political worldview via his two recent books, *War on the Middle Class* and *Independents Day*, and you’ll find changes, contrasts, and controversy. He is pro-choice on abortion, against gun control, critical of America’s unqualified support for Israel, and supportive of gay civil rights. Dobbs has been called “a blithering idiot” by Tom Friedman, the three-time

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Pulitzer Prize winner, as well as “a brilliant, highly informed, market-loving Republican addicted to economic truth” by former New York governor Mario Cuomo.

Politically, Lou Dobbs cannot be pigeon-holed. Consider this entry from his *War on the Middle Class*, which sounds like a Ralph Nader presidential campaign speech:

War on the Middle Class
How the Government, Big Business, and Special Interest Groups Are Waging War on the American Dream and How to Fight Back

by Lou Dobbs
 New York: Viking Press, 2006
 276 pages; \$24.95



Independents Day
Awakening the American Spirit

by Lou Dobbs
 New York: Viking Press, 2007
 288 pages; \$24.95

America has become a society owned by corporations and a political system dominated by corporate and special interests, directed by elites who are hostile—or at best indifferent to—the interests of working men and women of the middle class and their families. Corporate America holds dominion over the Republican and

Democratic parties through campaign contributions, armies of lobbyists that have swamped Washington, and control of political and economic think tanks and media.

In freeing himself from Republican orthodoxy, Dobbs admits in *War on the Middle Class* that there’s been “an evolution in my understanding of our failed public policies, business practices, and politics over the past five years, and of their disastrous impact on the single largest group of people in this country—our middle class.” In *Independents Day* he writes, “I’m an independent and a populist. I no longer believe the Republican and Democratic

parties are capable of serving the people: their priorities and focus are the special interests and corporatists who fund them, and now direct them and the rest of us.”

His core beliefs have evolved from his early career focus on making money in the stock market. Now Dobbs writes with passion—and preaches fiery sermons—about globalization, outsourcing, free trade machinations, and illegal immigration—especially illegal immigration. In *Independents Day* he opines about what he calls the alien invasion of America:

That fight will likely intensify, because the political, social, and economic interests driving open borders and amnesty are powerful, the stakes could hardly be larger, and American citizens are only slowly awakening to the threat to our nation that emanates from both the left and the right, the establishment and the radical.

His emphasis on illegal immigration as a vital issue to the culture and economy of America is reflected in the index of *War on the Middle Class*. Among the topics listed, ranging from “automobile industry” (“Japanese domination of,” “outsourcing by,” etc.) to George Walton, none receives more line items than “illegal immigration.” The 26 subtitles associated with the illegal immigration entry, with references to 131 pages, include:

- “benefits for immigrants versus U.S. Citizens”
- “Chamber of Commerce support for”
- “church-based support for”
- “Mexican encouragement of”
- “teaching jobs proposal for”

In recent years Dobbs’s message about the threat posed by illegals flowing into this country has intensified in proportion to his popularity. His influence and outreach extend beyond conventional

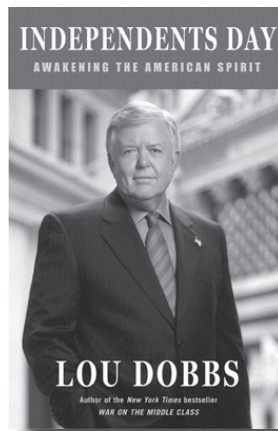
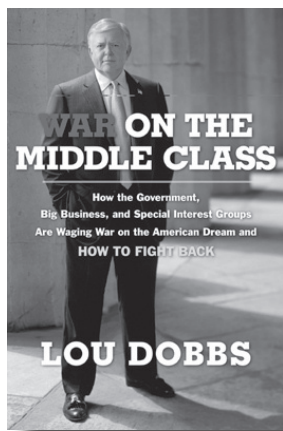
partisan lines. Curiously (or perhaps not), for example, this “lifelong Republican” was invited to speak to the 2006 convention of the 750,000-member International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers—traditionally a Democratic constituency. Later that day the union passed a strongly worded resolution in opposition to amnesty for illegal aliens and “guest worker” programs, and in support of immigration law enforcement at the borders and in the workplace. In *Independents Day* he describes his approach to the immigration crisis:

On my broadcast we have reported the facts that should form the parameters and foundation of what has at long last

become a national dialogue...on our illegal immigration and border-security crisis. I have put representatives of all sides of the debate and discussion on the broadcast in an effort to examine the facts...and to expose the varied agendas and interests of the elites who have tried to ram their positions through Congress and down the throats of American citizens.

Dobbs’s impact on politics and public policy is expected to strengthen even more: starting in March he will host a daily three-hour nationally syndicated radio show in addition to his television broadcasts, written commentary, and speech making. This is a man on a mission.

For Dobbs, there are no sacred cows. He crusades on a platform grounded in the premise that “our community and national values are increasingly challenged by corporatism, consumerism, and ethnocentric multiculturalism.” In *War On The Middle Class* he states, “I can’t take seriously anyone who takes either the Republican or Democratic Party seriously; in part, because both are bought and paid for by Corporate America and special interests. And neither party gives a damn about the middle



class.” Those sentiments have earned him a considerable following—and not a few enemies. From the left, *Nation* magazine accuses him of “hysteria and jingoism”; from the right, Mark Levin of *National Review* magazine asserts, “CNN’s Lou Dobbs is an embarrassment.”

Lou Dobbs revels in his role as an anti-establishment provocateur, and that position is rooted in the rich American tradition of populism. In *Independents Day* he writes, “I actually believe that populism is gaining the power to defeat elitism.” Populists reject the status quo and advocate new ideas which span perceived ideological and partisan differences.

In 1968, Alabama governor George Wallace, a populist, proclaimed “there’s not a dime’s worth of difference between the Democrat and Republican Parties.” In *War on the Middle Class* Dobbs observes, “Most of our elected officials, whether Democrat or Republican, have been bought and paid for through campaign donations from corporate lobbyists and other special interest groups.”

In 1992, independent presidential candidate Ross Perot stated, “Washington has become a town filled with sound bites, shell games, handlers, media stuntmen who posture, create images, talk, shoot off Roman candles, but don’t ever accomplish anything. We need deeds, not words, in this city.” In *Independence Day*, Dobbs writes, “Both of our major political parties have become little more than well-funded marketing organizations, advertising brands that the corporate and special-interest elites manage for their own benefits, with almost no regard for the common good and the national interest.”

More recently, pundit Pat Buchanan has remarked, “Political correctness, political cowardice, political opportunism, a sense of guilt for America’s sins, and twin ideologies have a grip on our elites not unlike a religious cult. The proud old boast, ‘Here, sir, the people rule!’ no longer applies.” In *Independents Day*, Lou Dobbs comments:

[T]he elites of politics and business seem to believe that their power flows from a superior DNA structure that confers upon them an omniscience in economic and geopolitical affairs that three hundred million citizens cannot hope to comprehend. Their arrogance now threatens the future of our nation, and their elitist sense of entitlement has reached such heights that our leaders are now openly dismissive of the will of the people.



In *War on the Middle Class*, Dobbs has transcribed his hard-hitting television persona onto paper. It’s a situation

analysis of America’s culture war. “Make no mistake: This is an outright war,” he writes, because “to call it anything less is a disservice to the truth and to the American people... I’m biased in my preference for direct language, but I’m convinced there is no other way to address the most critical issues facing the country.” He doesn’t disappoint.

Independents Day is a call to action. Dobbs states, “I believe that only the energized, active engagement and participation of our citizens at every level of politics and government will change our national direction.” He brands the movement he helped create and gives it a blessing: “Populism requires no political apparatus, no party machine. Populism as a philosophy and movement requires only that we put our people and our national interest first, that we honor our Constitution and nation, and that we respect one another’s rights of individual liberty and equality of opportunity.” He also warns that “Populism requires that we Americans be neither timid nor retiring in asserting our rights....”

In a presidential election year, this two-volume manifesto is a welcomed counterweight to the heavy doses of bipartisan, mind-numbing political advertising. After watching “Lou Dobbs Tonight,” turn off the television and read these books. ■