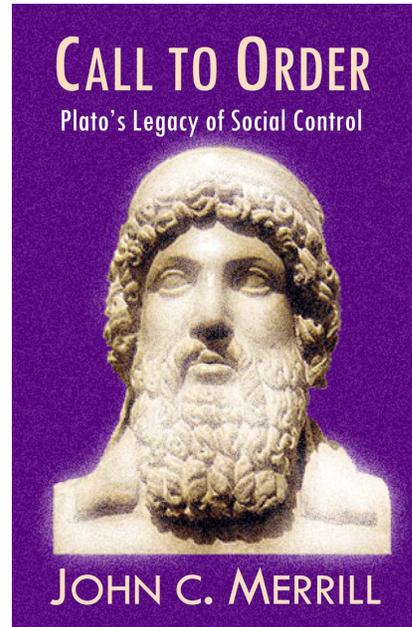


For Immediate Release

## Decision-making in 21st Century Likely to Become More Authoritarian, First Amendment Scholar Predicts

SPOKANE, WA — Decision-making in American government and other institutions in the 21st century is likely to become more authoritarian and will drift away from the democratic ideals of the Enlightenment, one of the nation’s best-known libertarian First Amendment scholars is warning in a new book.

“The postmodern inclination toward relativism and subjectivism, when faced with the real dangers of human survival, will begin to fade away and ... acute dangers require strong leaders, and disorder — exemplified in the 20th century politics — will demand ever-stricter government controls and social order,” John C. Merrill, a professor emeritus of journalism, writes in his new book, *Call to Order: Plato’s Legacy of Social Control*. “Hobbes, with his clarion call from Plato, will raise his voice again against the champions of people’s sovereignty. Human responsibilities will increasingly replace human rights as power-systems step in to bring order to nations and to larger governmental blocs.” He adds that:



In the name of the poor and downtrodden, the exploited environment, the impulse to egalitarianism, and the need for a common health care and education, the state controllers will join forces to centralize power in their hands. As citizens become more individually impotent, turning for their every need to the central force, social order will be assured.

Authoritarianism is seductive, with a beguiling quality, a disciplined aura, a lure for orderly minds who want structure and social engineering, and a sense of security and institutional stability. Plato even made it seem desirable and rational. It is a potent socio-political magnet that pulls unceasingly at nations and people — and also at journalism. It implies authority and mass-man wants leadership. In many countries even journalists, among the society’s “intellectuals,” feel comfortable having strong hands at the editorial helm. They, like so many people, are somewhat uneasy with freedom and desire “to escape” from it.

Merrill, who was professor of journalism at the University of Missouri before retiring from teaching in 2004, is author of more than 30 books. In *Call to Order*, he summarizes Plato’s ideas about social control, which emphasized a benevolent but authoritarian system, and then briefly traces Plato’s legacy, covering all major thinkers up to the present.

The lure of authority always brings out the arbiters, those who see themselves as the order-givers, the knowledgeable, the leaders, the dictators of correctness for an institution, the state, or society. In the U.S., as World War II ended, these arbiters of correct (“responsible”) journalism began to rush onto the stage to denigrate Enlightenment liberalism and to set standards for journalism and communication. They questioned the value of individual freedom. This din of “progressive” and

“authoritative” voices of the intellectual elite has spread throughout our educational and public life in spite of continued talk of “democracy” and the postmodern inclination to relativism.

A new call was going out — a call for Order. A need was seen for more authoritative norms, for more conformity, for more discipline — in short for more responsibility. This was a definite shift in emphasis. During the early part of the 20th century emphasis had been given (at least in the West) to pluralism and press freedom. In societies mainly emanating from the European Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a free and independent press was thought important—even essential — to public welfare. Free expression was emphasized.

But at mid-century doubts about the importance of freedom and individualism sprang up and critics began to point out that these Enlightenment values had not worked and were leading to an unruly society and communication system. It appeared that it was time for a paradigm shift — and it was a substantial one: from freedom to responsibility, from disorder to order, from individualism to groupism.

Merrill is particularly concerned about the rise of neo-Marxist theories, postmodernism, and the communitarianism and public journalism movements. “They have not directly condemned freedom, but in very subtle ways have proposed limiting the power of the media managers and putting it in the hands of the citizens or in government agencies. The assumption here is that some extra-press authority would be more responsible managers than are the current directors, publishers, and editors.”

Communitarianism today is trying to reestablish community and values, to put the society above egoistic individualism, and to stress social obligation rather than an obsession with personal freedom. The collectivity in a sense becomes the authority — a kind of democratic authoritarianism. Does this mean that the “community” has some sort of authority? It seems so, but its nature is amorphous. At any rate, individualism must be lost or subsumed in the community.

Merrill believes that, in terms of information, there are still some “optimistic signs.” He says newspapers like *The New York Times*, Switzerland’s *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, Spain’s *El Pais*, France’s *Le Monde*, England’s *The Independent* and Mexico’s *La Reforma* will continue to improve and provide credible information. However, the long-term prospects for libertarian ideas of freedom and individuality are not promising.

Plato’s society is a kind of a heaven on earth. Everybody is happy, knows his or her place, respects the authority that exists, is not envious of others, is cooperative and loyal to the organic whole, and is satisfied in the stability of the collective reality. It is easy to see why such an ideal has grabbed masses of insecure people throughout the ages. But, unfortunately, it has also spawned dictators who—lacking the humanity and wisdom of Plato—have submitted millions of people to fear, starvation, torture, and death.

So Plato’s legacy of social control is a mixed one. It has provided stability and Order where they were needed. It has led to inhumane and unimaginable suffering where it was not needed. Plato’s concept of an ordered society is interesting to think about, like other utopias that beckon to us. But it should be a warning that order may very possibly lead to conformity, and conformity to the death of the individual soul. Society, through regimentation, may be prolonged, but it may be only a society of depersonalized robots.