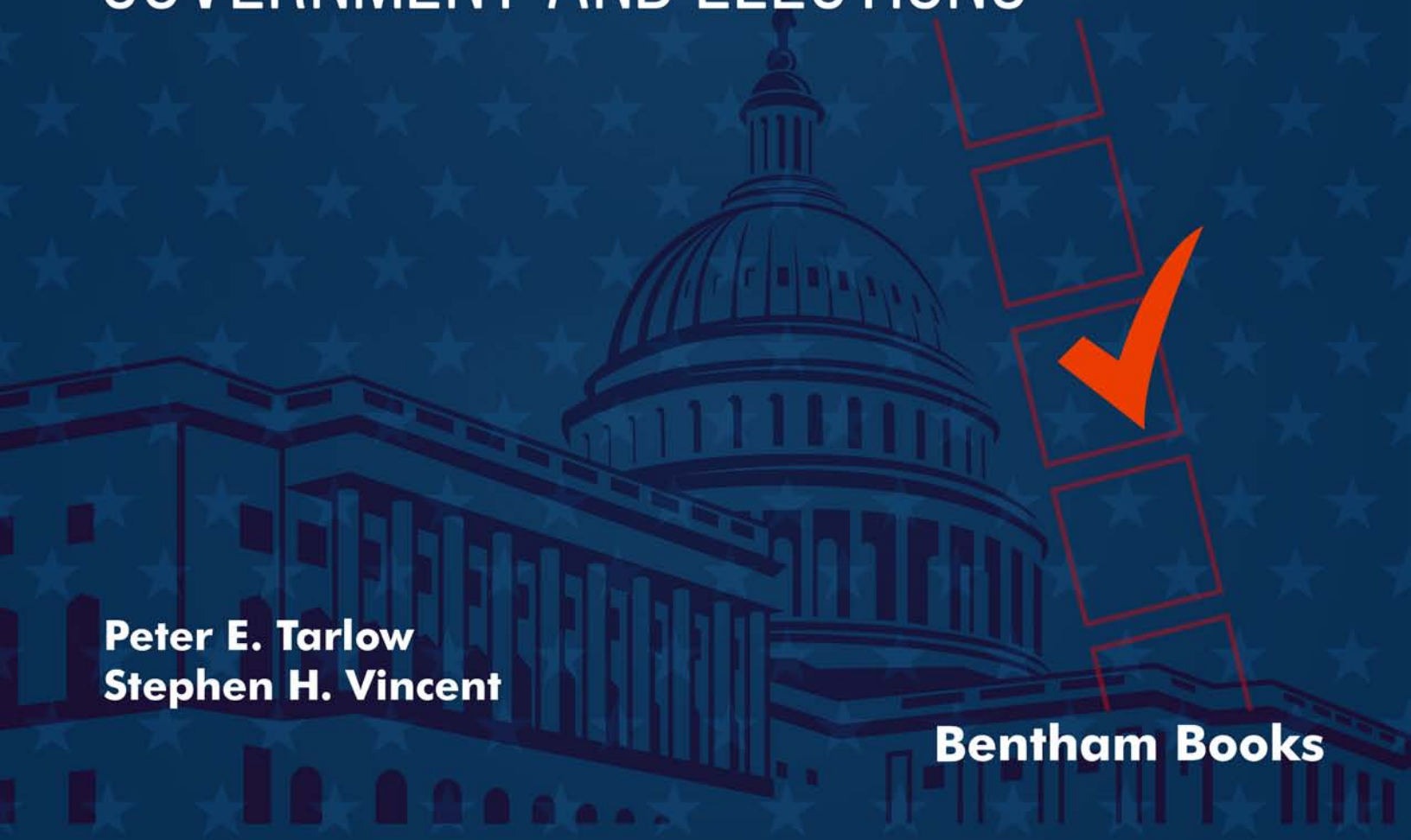




# **UNDERSTANDING THE U.S. GOVERNMENT:** A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND ELECTIONS

**Peter E. Tarlow  
Stephen H. Vincent**

**Bentham Books**



# **Understanding the U.S. Government: A Guide to Understanding American Government and Elections**

Authored by

**Peter E. Tarlow**

&

**Stephen H. Vincent**

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Authors: Peter E. Tarlow and Stephen H. Vincent

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## FOREWORD

Every book is a journey. When I first open a new one, I like to scan the table of contents to get a feel of where the authors are trying to take me. When I opened *Understanding the U.S. Government: A Guide to Understanding American Government and Elections* and skimmed the table of contents, I must admit I began to sweat a little. The series of questions that Peter Tarlow and Stephen Vincent have used to frame this book instantly transported me back to the final exam of my high school civics class, which is not one of my prouder moments. Luckily, unlike that inconsiderate final exam, after raising my blood pressure with those questions, they gave me the answers!

This book is a wonderful reminder of things that are inspirational, confusing, mysterious, frustrating, and practical in our system of governance. More importantly, it is a great primer on how we as citizens can and should participate in that system. It reminds us that, in a successful democracy, “leaders are encouraged to do the will of the people”. Of course, that only works if those leaders know the will of the people. Our job is to tell them. And each of us, no matter where we sit on the political spectrum or how active we have been in our democracy up to this point, has the right and the privilege of making a crystal-clear statement with our vote.

I still remember the first year I voted. I asked myself a lot of the questions that are in the table of contents of this book. I felt stupid because I didn’t already know the answers, and I didn’t want to embarrass myself by asking someone. I would have loved to have this book available back then. It would have removed so many of the artificial concerns and self-doubts that kept me from fully embracing my ability as a citizen to make a difference in this country.

Shortly after I cast my first vote in a presidential election, I entered the United States Air Force. I spent the next 40 years trying to remain as apolitical as possible in my professional life. When I retired, I became the dean of a graduate school founded on the idea of public service as a noble calling, on the criticality of being part of the public solution, and on the imperative of serving your fellow citizens. Reading this book made me realize I had forgotten the answers to many of the questions the authors have addressed. It reminded me that “elections have consequences” and that the role ordinary citizens play in our democracy is the cornerstone of that democracy. It reminded me that the role I play matters. And it gave me knowledge that I need to play that role more capably in the future. I am confident it will do the same for you.

Every book is a journey...this one leads to a better America.

**General (Ret.) Mark A. Welsh III**  
Texas A&M University  
20<sup>th</sup> Chief of Staff, Air Force, United States

## **ABSTRACT**

This book provides a practical overview of the mechanics and philosophical underpinnings of the United States political system, which has been quite successful for over two centuries. It is a handbook or guide for American citizens to generate more informed decisions and for people from other lands to understand this system that impacts the entire world.

Questions and answers discuss the United States' founding documents, the mechanics of the American election system, and the differences between local, state, and federal governments. Explorations include how money and political contributions, through lobbyists, individual donations, and PACs, impact the United States and its political decisions.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Preface



In 2019, Peter Tarlow and Steve Vincent decided to write a book explaining in layperson's terms how the United States of America's elections work. That book was written by Americans, for Americans. The book's goal was to become a valuable tool for American voters and soon-to-be voters. That 2019 book is the inspiration for this current book.

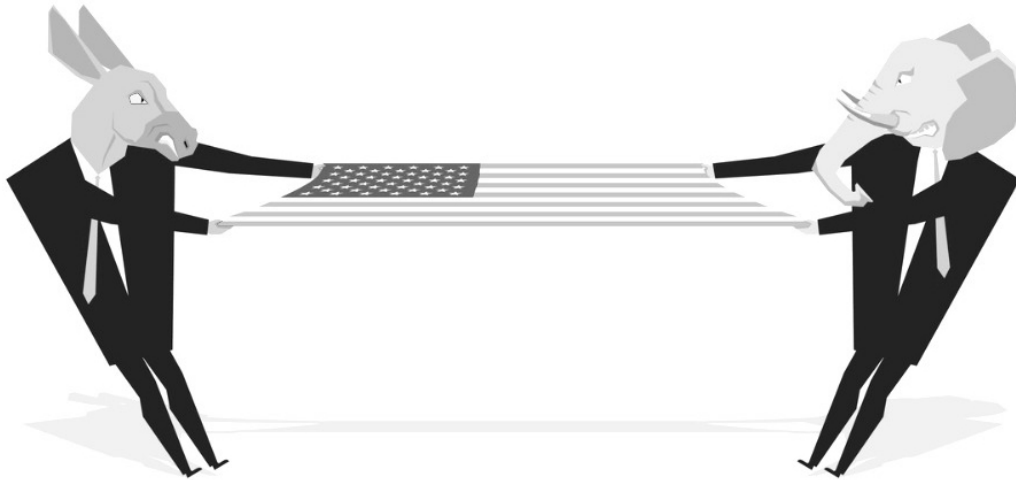
Tarlow and Vincent did not set out to author a detailed academic book, but this book aims to provide basic information to help Americans become knowledgeable citizens.

Although this book speaks directly to an American audience, it also aims to provide insights into the American political system for those who observe it from afar and often need clarification on the workings of the American political and election system.

Peter E. Tarlow and Stephen H. Vincent  
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## CHAPTER 2

# Maintaining Personal Relations in an Age of Political Discord



**Keywords:** Political discord, Political intimidation.

Once upon a time, people in polite company did not discuss money, politics, and religion. People with good manners did not discuss these subjects during family get-togethers or when socializing, networking, or celebrating. Today, only a few people follow this unwritten social rule. Not only do we discuss money, politics, and religion, but these topics have almost turned into contact sports.

Most people still firmly believe that when playing a sport, the players must follow the rules. There is a winner and a loser, and at the end of the match, everyone comes together, shakes hands, and tries to learn from their mistakes. Unfortunately, we now live in an age where the “game” of politics never ends, and the losing side does not recognize that the other team has won. Furthermore, too many people judge other people by their political views. We have become opposing rivals instead of just having opposing ideas.

---

**CHAPTER 3**

## Rights and Responsibilities



**Keywords:** Civil rights, Civic duties, Human rights.

### **WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND CIVIC DUTIES?**

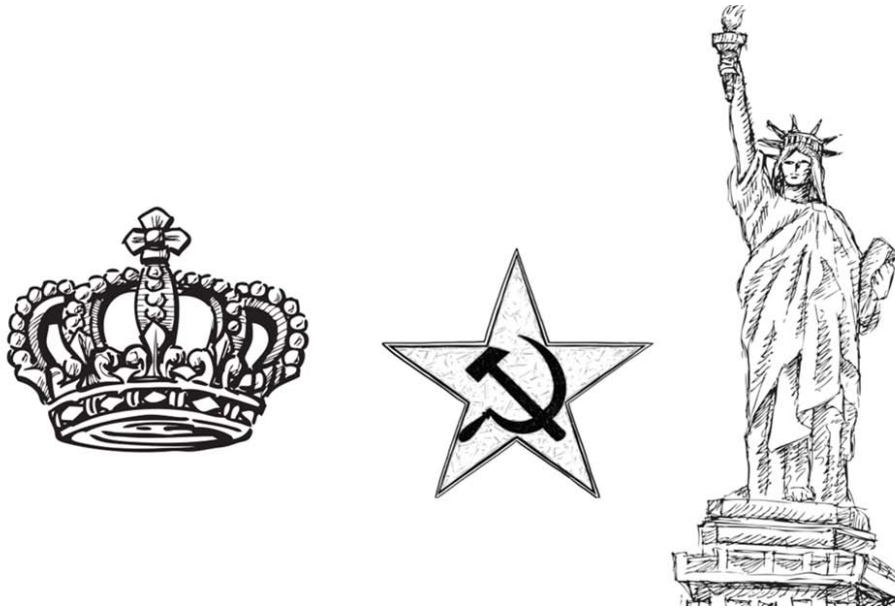
Human rights are generally viewed as fundamental rights that transcend national boundaries. In 1948, in response to the Holocaust perpetrated by German Nazis, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a foundation of international law. These principles are based on, and expanded from, *Les droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (translated into English as *the Declaration of the Rights of Man* by the Yale Law School Avalon Project) during the French Revolution. The document was promulgated on August 26, 1789. These rights were meant to guarantee the right to life and protection from torture.

The term “Civil Rights”, as differentiated from human rights, refers to the rights that one has by being a citizen of a specific nation, in this case, being a citizen of the United States.

---

**CHAPTER 4**

---

**Competing Political and Economic Philosophies**

**Keywords:** Capitalism, Communism, Conservatives, Fascism, Liberals, Socialism.

**ECONOMIC SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES**

Traditionally, there are four major political and economic theories: capitalism, fascism, socialism, and communism. No nation has a pure form of any of these systems. Instead, countries have some form of these concepts, with the distinction being in the quantity and quality mixture each nation employs. Below is a pure definition of each theory and a short critique.

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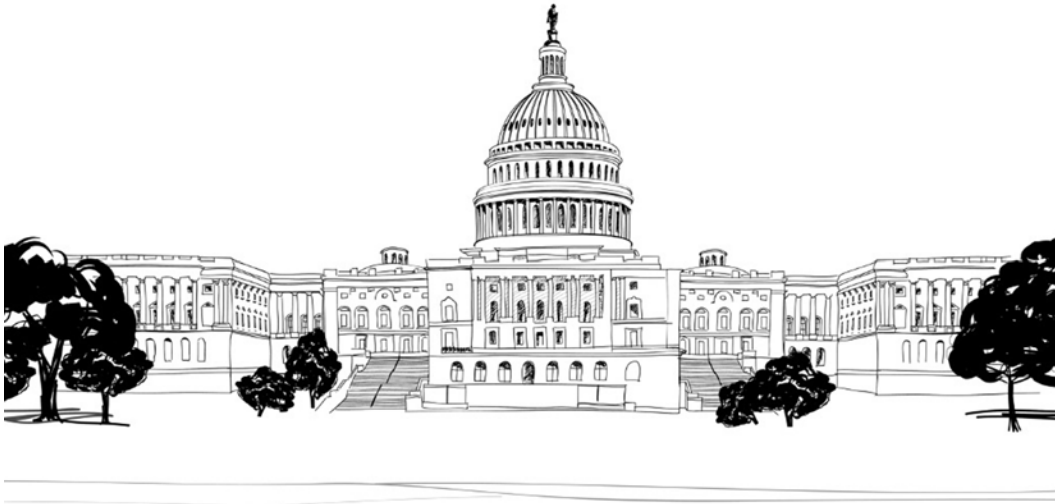
**WHAT IS CAPITALISM?**

Capitalism is based on the idea that human beings are motivated by needs and that progress comes about through competition. Capitalism embraces the concept of

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**CHAPTER 5**

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**The Ins-and-Outs of American Democracy**

**Keywords:** Democracy, Electoral college, Federal republic.

**WHAT IS A DEMOCRACY?**

Democracy is a form of government in which citizens choose their government's policies or elect all or some of their leaders to represent their wishes. The term comes from the Greek word *demos*, meaning people, and *Kratos*, meaning power. In the United States, we understand the term to mean that we strive to provide freedom and equality for all citizens, and we have rules to ensure that all legally qualified people have an equal vote, regardless of their wealth or family background.

In a democracy and within the confines of the law, the majority decides the direction and action of their community or country.



The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

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## WHAT IS THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE?

The Declaration of Independence set the moral justification for our revolt against British tyranny. Americans wanted all the rights of Englishmen, but England held that the colonists were there to benefit the Crown and Parliament. “No taxation without representation!” was a familiar cry. The Declaration of Independence stands as a beacon of light, expressing the best of American ideals.

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## CHAPTER 7

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### The Media and U.S. Elections



**Keywords:** Fake news, Feelings, Media, News outlet, Opinions, PBS/Public Broadcasting Service.

#### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA?

The media exists in many different forms. In the modern world, print and radio are the oldest modes, followed by cinema, television, and now the Internet and social media. We can easily divide the media into news reporting, opinion, and entertainment. Most Americans recognize that most media outlets slant their work, despite claiming to be unbiased, and rarely are objective in their reporting.

We rely on the media to:

- Inform and educate.
- Investigate and inform us of questionable activities.
- Be a platform for opinions.
- Be a platform to publicize activities and ideas.
- Entertain.

## CHAPTER 8

# The American Political Party System



**Keywords:** Candidate, Democrats, Identity Politics, Political parties, Republicans.

### WHAT ARE POLITICAL PARTIES?

Political parties are individuals who band together around a common idea or candidate. Some countries have one ruling party; typically, they are countries with an authoritarian government. In contrast, some countries with parliamentary-based governments have a multitude of parties.

### HOW MANY PARTIES DO WE HAVE IN THE U.S.?

Currently, the United States has two major political parties and several smaller parties. Both major parties have sub-sections called “wings”. Primary elections usually determine control of the two major parties. There is no limit to the number of parties that can run in elections, although many states have specific requirements to be able to appear on an election ballot.

## CHAPTER 9

# Political and Economic Influences: Lobbyists and Monetary Donations



**Keywords:** Bundler, Down ballot, Lobbyist, Political donations.

### WHAT IS A LOBBYIST?

Political lobbyists work to influence actions, government decisions, and policies. They must be registered, but they do not necessarily receive a salary. Often, they represent specific industries and “lobby” in favor or against legislation that might help or hurt the industry or cause they are supporting.

### WHAT IS A BUNDLER AND A PAC, AND WHEN DOES IT BECOME DARK MONEY?

*Bundler* is another word for *fundraiser*. They collect contributions for a political candidate or party. PAC stands for Political Action Committee. Like fundraisers, they work for specific ideals, political policies, and legislative positions or causes. They collect money to promote a policy or stop it from happening. They are not necessarily aligned with a political party. They can and often contribute to more than one candidate or party vying for the same elected office.

## CHAPTER 10

### How U.S. Elections Work



**Keywords:** County, Fraud, States, Voter eligibility.

#### WHY DO WE NEED ELECTIONS?

It is in our genes to join groups following a leader or several leaders. The first leaders could defeat their rivals, were better hunters, had more charisma, or all of the above.

The matriarch, the oldest and wisest female elephant, almost always leads herds or parades of elephants. An alpha male dog leads packs of wolves. Herds of buffalo do everything their leader directs without question. When human hunters kill the leader, the rest of the group stands around immobilized and baffled. The result is that hunters can easily slaughter the whole herd.

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**CHAPTER 11**

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**CONCLUSION**

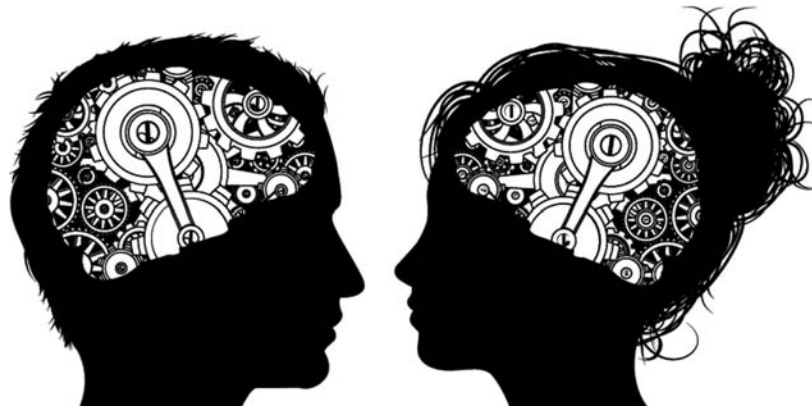
This book's goals are threefold. Its first goal is to educate. We hope that by reading it, you have a better idea of the details, the “ins and outs” of the American political system, and the workings of the American government. This book is a helpful guide for U.S. citizens desiring a better understanding of our governmental system. For non-Americans, the book will enlighten those who seek to understand the essence of the United States' political system.

The book's second goal is to help American citizens make wise choices when they vote. As such, this book encourages its readers to do their own research and to determine which candidates they support based not on emotions but facts. As part of one's research, we encourage our readers to have a non-emotional discussion with friends and family and share what they have learned. Really listen to their thoughts and opinions. Ask questions about the reasons behind your family and friends' ideas rather than always advocating for your own. There is an old saying that we have two ears and one mouth because we should listen twice as much as we speak. Do not be afraid to listen. Listening allows us to hear the other side and prevents emotions from overtaking reality. We are not electing a friend but leaders who can develop and implement policies that will serve us all now and in the future.

**ACTIONS VS WORDS**

The book's third goal is to help readers discern the differences between words and actions. Morality is not about what our politicians say but what they do. In times of great emotional and political turmoil, such as the current cycle, we must remember that our words and actions have consequences. When we seek to harm others with whom we disagree, we have chosen not only to disrespect one of the foundations of our country's Judeo/Christian ethic but also to destroy civil discourse and society.

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**CHAPTER 12****The Practical Side for American Citizens**

How you participate in the American system is a personal decision allowed by freedom in the United States. One narrow area is how do you, the American voter, decide for whom to vote. What ideals and ideas do you value enough to support? What ordinances or amendments do you favor? Before you vote, a little inventory of your beliefs, views, and requirements helps you cast an intelligent vote. What do you need, want, and expect from your elected officials?

To help you decide your priorities, we offer these exercises. There are no right or wrong answers. Think deeply about these questions and then vote your conscience. Remember, no one has a monopoly on truth. After studying the issues, each person must do what is right in their eyes.

First, take some time to think about these broad political-philosophical issues and then apply your thoughts to the specific subjects mentioned immediately after them. This book does not intend to tell you, the reader, whom to vote for or what propositions to support. The book's purpose is to inspire readers to contemplate the issues and candidates of the upcoming elections. Decide what is best for you, the reader, and for our country. How you vote will determine our immediate future and possibly the course of our national destiny for years to come.

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**Peter E. Tarlow**

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Peter E. Tarlow is a world-renowned speaker and expert specializing in the impact of crime and terrorism on the tourism industry, event and tourism risk management, and tourism and economic development. He was the rabbi at Texas A&M University for over thirty years, and he currently is a member of the faculty of Texas A&M Medical College and a chaplain for the College Station, (Texas) police force and for the U.S. Federal Prison Camp in Bryan, Texas. He has worked with numerous U.S. government agencies, including the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Customs, the FBI, the U.S. Park Service, the Department of Justice, and the Speakers Bureau of the U.S. Department of State. He has published multiple books and academic articles.



**Stephen H. Vincent**

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Stephen H. Vincent is a successful businessman whose first career spanned thirty-four years in the electric utility industry. In his second career, his efforts have been redirected to providing state-of-the-art electric systems to improve the health and education for the neediest people in the world. His altruistic organization, Power From the SON, has provided electricity to hospitals, schools, and orphanages in Liberia, Kenya, and Honduras. He is the author of a book and a chairperson of The Salvation Army Advisory Board of Bryan\College Station, a board member of Higher Education Servicing Corporation, and BUILD Texas A&M University.