It says something about the times we live in that Al Franken's scathing "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them" continues to top The New York Times best-seller list.

Consider the pesky matter of those weapons of mass destruction. Or the lingering questions over Vice President Dick Cheney and his Halliburton cronies. Or the Enron scandal, the Catholic priest scandal, the Martha Stewart scandal or the Jayson Blair scandal. Even William Bennett – former education secretary, drug czar and once-respected author of "The Book of Virtues" – has had his own scandal. Earlier this year, reporters discovered he had a multimillion-dollar gambling habit.

Has there ever been such a solid case for cynicism?

Consumer confidence? Shaky. It plunged in September even more than economists had expected, partly because of a continuing bleak job market.

Voter turnout? Dismal. According to the nonprofit Center for Voting and Democracy, national turnout remains 20 percent lower than it was in the 1960s. People will vote on "American Idol" contestants, or whether Prince William is hotter than Ashton Kutcher – just not their government leaders.

And why should they? A July 2002 survey by the Institute for Global
Ethics found that 40 percent of Americans think most candidates deliberately twist the truth to voters – while 15 percent said, they all do.

"People feel that any way they turn – to church, to the government, to the stock market or to the love of their life – they're being disillusioned," said Professor Iva Deutchman, who teaches political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York. "It can get to the point where you don't even want to get out of bed in the morning, let alone do anything more complicated, like voting."

Where did it come from?

In this country, most historians date the rise of cynicism to sometime around the Vietnam War and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy – and they say it's been getting worse ever since.

We've gone from the cautionary "It's a jungle out there" to the darkly sardonic "Life sucks, then you die."

But our Age of Cynicism, as some social commentators have dubbed it, has not come whimsically. It has been a school of hard knocks – of Watergate, Nixon, Iran-Contra, Gary Hart, Bill "I did not have sex with that woman" Clinton, the 2000 presidential-election fiasco.

**Spirit of 9/11 fades quickly**

But why didn't the Sept. 11 attacks change us, as so many predicted? Didn't we unite, if briefly? Didn't we circle the wagons, pay our respects, set aside our partisan bickering and wave our flags?

"The surprise to me is not that we got back into our cynical, ironic mode, not that people began to voice dissent again," said Robert Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "The surprise was that so many people who should know better predicted that it would be any other way. When these pronouncements were made – 'This changes everything,' and 'the age of irony is over' – they showed a profound lack of knowledge of how this sort of thing has gone throughout history. You can't erase in one day a collective appetite that has been building up for so long in so many complex ways."

[page D6]

Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "The surprise was that so many people who should know better predicted that it would be any other way. When these pronouncements were made – 'This changes everything,' and 'the age of irony is over' – they showed a profound lack of knowledge of how this sort of thing has gone throughout history. You can't erase in one day a collective appetite that has been building up for so long in so many complex ways."

'Situational Cynics'

Most of us would qualify not so much as hard-core cynics but as what sociologists call "situational" cynics.

We've gotten our cynicism the hard way. We've earned it.

Russ Russell, a 56-year-old Orlando businessman, says he recently "converted" to cynicism out of
disgust for what he's witnessing in national politics.

"I just don't believe what's being said to me" he said. "Unfortunately, I think I have good reason - which is the history of the people I'm listening to. Frankly, I don't understand why everybody isn't cynical."

Philip Mirvis, co-author of "The Cynical Americans," says we have a long history of "sensible skepticism" in this country, which he sees as healthy. In his book, he refers to two groups: those who use cynicism as a shield – a defense mechanism – and those who use it as a sword, or a tool of attack.

"With the sword," Mirvis said, you're not simply protecting yourself, you're actually hurting others. You're hustling. And you are feeding this vicious cycle."

It's noteworthy that "The Cynical Americans" was published back in 1989, when it made a considerable splash on the talk-show circuit. But Mirvis says his own subsequent research, and the research of others, leads him to conclude that if anything, the attitude is only more pervasive now.

In part, he blames a sense of entitlement with which baby boomers were raised. Having come of age in relative affluence, they expected material security and comfort. They also expected a reward for hard work and loyalty from their employers - and so are especially traumatized by an era of corporate downsizing.

But Mirvis worries more about the generations following the boomers - generations X and Y. The only thing that saves them from being disillusioned, he says, is that they never had any illusions to start with.

Robert C. Bartlett, author and associate professor of political science at Emory University, has a more damning view. Last winter, in an essay dubbed "Souls Without Longing" he wrote of a "malaise" spreading across the nation and robbing young people of their capacity to even imagine a noble and rewarding life.

"I have seen a tremendous cynicism (among the younger generation) about the news itself," said David Mindich, author of "Tuned Out: Why Young People Don't Follow the News," due out in 2004 from Oxford University Press. "There's a feeling that 'we can't trust anyone in news, we can't trust anyone in politics.'"

Teaching journalism and mass communication at St. Michael's College in Vermont, Mindich mostly sees students who are earnest, thoughtful and engaged socially – though not politically.

"We need to do more to translate the desire to volunteer in a soup kitchen to a desire to change the political underpinnings, that determine whether that soup kitchen gets the funds to keep running," he said.