

WHAT DO YOU KNOW? NOT MUCH!

Anti-Intellectualism and America's Future

*Eggheads of the world unite.
You have nothing to lose except your yolks!*

--Adlai Stevenson

The host of a popular NPR radio program begins his weekly show with this question: "What do you know?" to which the audience replies enthusiastically "Not much!" The highlight of the show is a quiz involving trivia questions at which even the most well informed contestants have to guess.

When I visit India my professional friends parade their children before me in an impressive show of their academic achievements. One night one seven-year old did a virtuoso recitation of all the US states and their capitals. Many Americans of any age would be hard pressed to locate India on a map, let alone many of the American states.

My Indian experience was not limited to the scholarly elite. After realizing that her very existence depended upon it, I reluctantly kept the servant that came with my one-bedroom apartment in Bangalore. Lakshmi had an invalid husband and three daughters, and she worked long hours to pay for her daughters' tuition. They came with her every day, and they worked diligently all morning preparing for their afternoon classes.

One day in November, 1992, two students came to my office at Panjab University and, after a short greeting, asked me what the meaning of life was. I was amazed and stunned. I gathered my wits enough to give them a short lecture on the wisdom of the Middle Way of Buddha, Confucius, and Aristotle. In thirty-one years of teaching American students, I was never asked a question of such magnitude and profundity.

I just recently I received an e-mail from a student in Lucknow, India who had read my work on Gandhi on the web. In the same vein as the students above he requested that I be his "mentor and guide and help me making the rest of my life constructive." To his additional request that I make him my "disciple," I had to remind him that I was a mere pandit (scholar) and not a guru.

It is well known that Americans are the most insular and worst informed people in the world. Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka was utterly surprised to hear an educated American speak of the recent war in Yugoslavia as if it took place in Asia and involved the Chinese Communists. Soyinka rightly believes that geography is just as important as history, which is "the material reality from which everything else derives."

We Americans have a president who once called the Greeks "Greecians." (That's a hair formula, George!) During the 2000 election he could not identify any of the central Asian countries that were important for Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush also scandalized all Indians by calling the Hindus "Hindis." I hope that he got that straight before receiving the Indian prime minister on a recent state visit. I assume that he was told that the

Manmohan Singh is a Sikh and not a Hindu. This is the type of ignorance that led men in California to drag a Sikh from his car and beat him to death because he was an "Arab."

Recently novelist Michael Crichton was treated to a private audience with President Bush. Karl Rove had arranged the meeting after Bush had read Crichton's recent book of fiction *State of Fear*, whose basic premise is that environmentalists have exaggerated global warming. Crichton received a journalism award from the American Association of Petroleum Geologists and Republican senators praised his book when he appeared before a congressional committee.

Not only do Americans know very little of substance, they are, incredibly enough, proud of their ignorance and vote for a president as ill informed as themselves. Sadly H. L. Mencken's 1920 prophecy has been fulfilled: "As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron." Plato was right after all: democracy without intellectual leadership becomes mobocracy.

Mencken of course exaggerates, because this problem is not a matter of intelligence. One of my students once wrote a course evaluation that began "this professor is a good teacher, but he thinks we are a bunch of dumb shits." This student totally missed the point of the sermonette that prompted this response. After an especially bad test performance, I told this ethics class that I thought that two years of compulsory national service would be a good thing for every high school graduate as a way to get a better grip on their lives.

Today's American students are smart enough IQ-wise, but they are not prepared, either emotionally or academically, to take full advantage of the university experience. The U.S. has the lowest high school graduation rate in the industrial world; and only half those graduates, a recent study has shown, are actually prepared for higher education.

If it not IQ, what is it? In 1963 it took me a long while to screw up my courage to inform my parents that I was switching my major from oceanography to philosophy. My dad answered the phone and there was a long pause after I blurted out my decision. His response was: "Son, how on earth will you make any money doing that?"

We Americans are a very practical people and this pragmatic spirit is the genius that has allowed us to succeed in so many areas. But there is a down side to this optimistic "always-can-do" or "always-get-results" attitude. For many Americans, such as my dear father, education, and the knowledge it ensues is a means to end rather than an end in itself.

European and Asian cultures still respect knowledge as an end itself and they value their teachers more and pay them accordingly. These societies also give solid support

their schools and their students. For example, all Danish university students who keep up their grades are given a \$500 monthly stipend.

While Congress cuts the National Science Foundation budget and prohibits funding for stem cell research, countries such as Korea blaze new scientific paths. Asia and Europe see the wisdom of investing in human capital as well as research and development. They realize that taxes are the price we pay for high culture and civilization.

There is a bitter irony in our crude utilitarian view of education and knowledge. Americans want their children to get good educations and become doctors, attorneys, scientists, and university professors. But many of them then turn around and reject the expertise and knowledge that these professionals develop.

I was shocked at a recent TV documentary featuring students talking about evolution. Almost without exception these students thought their own personal opinion about human origins was just as good as the results of population genetics. Even more problematic is the fact that some scientists, many inspired by their religious faith, are proposing that the theology of "intelligent design" is on par with the science of evolution. For more on this topic see www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/design.htm.

State Farm Insurance just moved its headquarters and its \$60 million payroll out of Monroe, Louisiana because of the area's lack of "intellectual capital." Even with lucrative financial incentives from several southern states, Toyota has chosen to locate a new plant in Canada. Although labor costs are higher, the Japanese don't have to pay employee health insurance. But the main reason is that over the years they have been disappointed at the education level of the Dixie workforce.

India and China are producing far more computer scientists and engineers than we are and foreign students now dominate American graduate schools in these areas. India's elite graduate schools have been recently ranked just behind Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. These graduates have made their presence felt in Silicone Valley, where 35 percent of the companies are Indian led; in NASA, where 36 percent of the scientists are Indian; and at the top of American medical practice and research. Fewer and fewer American students are choosing computer science, the other sciences, and engineering, primarily because they lack the study skills, ambition, or work ethic that these disciplines require.

Too many students lack Sitzfleisch, a German word that indicates that virtual flesh that exists between one's behind and the study chair. It was Sitzfleisch, not high IQ, that got me through 10 years of post-secondary education. The 21st Century will definitely belong to India and China, as well as the equally well trained and well informed citizens of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and other Asian countries. They have just as much Sitzfleisch as our forebearers. A Calvinist capitalism that neglects knowledge for knowledge's sake will be replaced by new Confucian, Hindu, and even Muslim varieties.