

The Egghead: Past, Present and Future

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I hold true scholarship to be the most worthwhile and honorable of callings. It not only provides the scholar with the tools he needs for tangible accomplishment, but also, if pursued properly and in depth, engenders a sort of humility and personal awareness that make for generous and just appraisal of one's fellow men and of oneself. I dare say most of you share this view in some measure but if you believe that such a view is the prevailing American estimate, I think you deceive yourselves. There are numerous indications that in the majority American opinion, scholarship in depth is not very important and, in fact, a bit ridiculous. And if some undergraduate student is hopeful that a sterling academic record in college will guarantee for him an estimable station in American society, he may be in for a rude awakening. Now, lest you find these observations too gloomy and pessimistic, let me interject that the intellectual climate of the country seems to be improving slowly, so that the scholar's position in American society is a little better than it was a decade ago. But scholars and scholarship still aren't very influential in this country, and, in my opinion, their relative unimportance constitutes a definite danger to our future.

What are the indications that scholarship, to which great lip service is certainly paid, is so lightly regarded by the American people? One item of relevance in this regard is the stature of the *intellectual* label. It is disagreeable, if not yet dangerous, to be called an intellectual since the term implies a lack of practical sense and relegates the bearer to a social position in which he can have virtually no influence on the management of anything. The intellectual is, in fact, almost always required by current circumstances to work under administration by non-intellectuals. And it goes without saying that it is hopeless for him to aspire to be elected to public office of any kind. To claim to be an intellectual is political suicide and a very effective campaign technique is to apply this opprobrious label to one's opponent and make it stick. Largely for political reasons, the now familiar word *egghead*, which is roughly synonymous with *intellectual*, was introduced in 1952. It seems to sum up most of the

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accepted characteristics, none of them flattering, that had previously been thought to belong to the intellectual. In addition, it has a somewhat comic implication and was used, with considerable success, against Adlai Stevenson when he was running for the presidency. Stevenson's quick wit enabled him to turn the tables to an extent but he lost the election nonetheless.¹

Eggheads and intellectuals were not always politically unacceptable in this country. If we define an intellectual as a person with a good mind and good education who uses both critically and creatively,² we cannot possibly avoid the conclusion that the political founders of our country were indeed intellectuals. Jefferson, with his splendid background in mathematics, languages, literature and the natural sciences of his day, was a profound intellectual. So was Alexander Hamilton and so were the Adamses (John graduated from Harvard in 1755; John Quincy, his son, graduated in 1787). All were intellectually well endowed, well-educated, and highly productive in unique and original ways. Politically, only the last of the group (John Quincy Adams) seems to have suffered from his intellectual status. He had the misfortune to run afoul of one Andrew Jackson, a partially educated, very forceful hell-raiser who came up the hard way. Jackson had only a few years of schooling before being swept up in the Revolutionary War at only 14 years of age. How intelligent he really was is hard to say but he certainly had a good measure of native shrewdness and aggressiveness. It would be an oversimplification to say that he started the anti-intellectual trend in the United States but the tradition of the politician as a man of the people, with a claim (real or fabricated) to an humble origin can justly claim Jackson as its patron saint.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me also add that we probably could not have built this vast country without men of great courage and impetuosity like Andrew Jackson. Nor could we have done without our hard-headed practical men. The inference, however, that educated, thoughtful men have no courage or common sense is, like most sweeping generalities, quite fatuous. But before I develop this view further, let me bring my argument up to date.

The anti-intellectual tradition in this country, whatever its causes, has continued apace and has produced some extraordinary paradoxes. One is the resolute and very deeply rooted practice of measuring success mainly in terms of dollars and cents. Not that this is a habit

¹ His quip, "Eggheads of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your yolks," did not even serve to unite the country's intellectuals in his favor.

² Thereby avoiding nineteenth century Marxian implications. In the above sense, or something like it, the word was first used in the late nineteenth century (OED).

limited to Americans but, in general, there is probably no more convincing way to evaluate our convictions and preferences than by looking at the items on which we are willing to spend sizable amounts of money. Judged in this rather cynical way, education, research, and religious activities come very low on our list. Look first at our outlays for public secondary education.

ATTENDANCE, TEACHER'S SALARIES AND TOTAL EXPENDITURES
PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN USA³

| Year | Average Daily Attendance | Average Teacher's Salary | Total Expended for Public Schools |
|------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1900 | 10.6 million | \$ 325 | \$ 0.215 billion |
| 1910 | 12.8 " | 485 | 0.426 " |
| 1920 | 16.2 " | 871 | 1.036 " |
| 1930 | 21.3 " | 1,420 | 2.317 " |
| 1940 | 22.0 " | 1,441 | 2.344 " |
| 1950 | 22.3 " | 3,010 | 5.830 " |
| 1960 | 32.4 " | 5,135 | 15.644 " |

Compare the 15.6 billion Americans spent on public schooling in 1960 with the amount spent the same year in various retail stores.

RETAIL STORE SALES BY KINDS OF BUSINESS⁴

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Automobile dealers | \$ 36.981 billion |
| Service stations | 17.594 " |
| Restaurants, bars, and night clubs | 16.403 " |
| Clothing stores | 11.258 " |
| Liquor stores | 4.880 " |
| Household appliance stores | 3.828 " |

It is surely not very encouraging to note that we spent more in 1960 in restaurants, bars, and night clubs than we did on all aspects of public elementary and secondary education. From another angle, our nation spent \$19.484 billion on recreation⁵ at the same time (1960) it was devoting \$4.639 billion to private education and research,⁶ and \$5.697 billion to religious and welfare activities.⁷ I do not imply that automobiles, recreation (including that obtained in restaurants and bars), or liquor are unnecessary or sinful. But if one can equate rela-

³ The World Almanac 1963, Edited by Harry Hansen: New York, New York World-Telegram.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 664.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 756.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

tive expenditure of money with value judgments, then it is inescapable that our nation rates public secondary education, private education at all levels, and religious activities well below recreation and the automobile.

The hopeful signs of which I spoke initially are to be found mainly in the vast amount of soul-searching we Americans are now doing. While there seems to be little evidence as yet that we are freely willing to change very much in what we call our way of life, there is a great deal of obvious discontent with American education and there is a considerable uneasiness about our vaunted technical superiority. Not all of this is the result of the Russian success with satellites in orbit. The realization is growing that scholars and scholarship have been prematurely relegated to near oblivion. Most of these examples of self-criticism appears in books and articles in so-called "long hair" journals which the vast majority of our American public never read. Yet there are bridges between the non-intellectual segments of our population and the eggheads who write the books and articles. Our public is bewildered but receptive, and is perceptive enough not to be totally deceived by pompous claims, usually made for some immediate political purpose, that our educational system and our technical achievements are vastly superior to all others.

Chronologically, one of the first really critical publications to gain wide circulation was Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, first published in 1942. The cover of the current paperback edition says it is an "explosive classic." It is indeed explosive (to its discredit) but it is by no means a classic. It is a poorly written diatribe that violently attacks virtually everyone and everything American. One is left with the inescapable conclusion that the only acceptable feature of the American scene is Mr. Wylie himself. But the author is too egocentric and too hysterical to be an effective critic or a very constructive one. The work is not a scholarly or disciplined effort but it contains a great deal that is to the point in a critical sense. Probably its most important item, which may have prophetic implications, is buried in the chapter entitled "Congressmen—with a Footnote on Mecca." The author asserts that "problems involving every science and every industry are being decided by men who cannot recite the multiplication tables. Small wonder our government has evolved into administration by appointed bureaucrats and away from government by the people's choices since they [those elected] have often shown themselves to be unable to attempt the task." Proceeding, however, to Wylie's recommendations for cure of the various evils he sees, we find ourselves in a morass of nonsense.

A later book that is to be taken much more seriously is Whyte's *The Organization Man*. Published in 1956, it is, in contrast to Wylie's frantic tract, a scholarly, sober work that has much to offer, whether or not one can accept it as a whole. It is a plea for genuine scholarship and for an educational system that will lay a sound foundation for it. Its main thesis is that our educational system has become oriented almost entirely around the needs of business enterprise, that our graduate schools of business, engineering and the physical sciences are degenerating into trade schools, and that the originality of true scholars is being suppressed by coercion to conform and by torrents of 'togetherness'. This is rather strong medicine but it is not easy to dismiss, and the sources Mr. Whyte calls up in support of his views are impressive. While things may not be as bad as he paints them, there is indeed a very strong pressure to dilute basic disciplines on the ground that they have no immediate relevance to practical affairs. In the United States for decades before the Russians got their first satellite into orbit, mathematics and the sciences were being progressively excluded and rendered increasingly anemic by curriculum planners whose emphasis was on what they chose to call social adjustment and on what they understood to be the humanities. It was, however, a poor bargain they presented to the student. They tended to dilute his contact with intellectual disciplines without substituting anything of consequence. The humanities, which they loudly claimed to be important but which they could scarcely even define, suffered as much as the natural sciences. It was essentially an anti-intellectual move. The preparation at the college level for medicine, for example, was thought to render the student too scientific and callous. He was, it was claimed, uncultured because his education did not include enough of the humanities. Therefore, we were told, some of the pre-medical sciences should be stricken from the curriculum and more cultural courses substituted. The unhappy fact is that the bare pre-medical requirements in mathematics and natural sciences were—and still are—inadequate to equip the students for the study of medicine. By no stretch of the imagination can the omission of sciences and the substitution of vapid, non-quantitative courses in social influences and smatterings of philosophy make a premedical student broader or do anything but jeopardize the public welfare. We can have trade-school doctors just as we can have handbook engineers but the country's future development would not be enhanced thereby. What is needed is a return to the old idea of a scholarly education in liberal arts and sciences, with a proper balance between both general areas, not a pale dilution of each. I can see no reason whatever to assume

that a history major cannot also take enough basic sciences and mathematics to enable him to understand the bare basic bones of nuclear physics or the physical principles involved in the circulation of the blood. On the other side, I can see urgent reason for the physics major to be exposed in depth to the broad sweep of history as the modern historian understands the term. The only worthwhile aim in higher education is to lead students into true scholarship whatever they do after they graduate. Obviously, all our college graduates cannot become researchers and it would be a disaster if they all tried to make a career of research. But something must be done to reverse the powerful anti-intellectual influences that have become so much a part of our national scene. The time is past when the strong-minded anti-intellectual, with his arrogant disdain for basic knowledge and exhibitionist adherence to bad grammar can effectively manage anything, be it a manufacturing plant, an airline, or a branch of the government. We have always needed good scholars, with ideals intact and sufficient courage to take the long view in lieu of the short one whenever indicated. We have always had some such men about but the number has steadily dwindled owing, in part, to misguided educational policy and to public rejection of respect for sound learning.

But change is in the air. I believe the future for the true scholar and genuine intellectual is very bright indeed. The country's future depends on him and his kind although his position at the moment is not particularly reassuring. Our great hope, moreover, is that the potential scholars of today will go ahead, in spite of anti-intellectual influences, and become true scholars, that they will not be afraid to be identified as intellectuals, and that they will carry scholarship into the minutest recesses of the complex life of the country.