

On Anti-intellectualism

Ken Olson

The Irish writer Oscar Wilde toured America in 1881. In his book, *Impressions of America*, he told of having encountered a Colorado miner who had become very rich during the silver boom. The man built a huge mansion in Denver, filled it with treasures from abroad, and, upon learning that an ancient Greek sculpture was much admired, ordered a replica of it. Wilde writes, "So infinitesimal did I find the knowledge of Art ...that an art patron actually sued the railroad company because the plaster cast of Venus de Milo had been damaged and delivered minus the arms. What is more surprising still, he won his case!" Of course, the statue of Venus had no arms from the moment it was discovered, but no one in the courtroom, including the judge, knew that. So, ignorance triumphed over truth and justice. It wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last.

A verse from an old song has it that "Things are dumb where I come from, They don't have any learnin,' Still they're happy as can be, Doin' what comes naturally." Ignorance is our natural condition before education, but civilization is built on the premise that ignorance is not bliss and that we do better when we know better.

America was founded by intellectuals, and the increase in knowledge has been steady. Until now. Other than in technology, various sorts of knowledge are now in steep decline. Many people are not only satisfied with little learning but fearful of more, and there is widespread sentiment that knowledge is dangerous (mostly for puncturing preconceived ideas, religious or otherwise). In this administration, experts are suspect, and "critical thinking" has become a dirty word. Information is distorted, dumbed down, and suppressed; history is whitewashed, news outlets and universities are attacked and sued. People are appointed to important positions precisely for their ignorance and willingness to undermine established truths. Massive funding cuts are made to research. In medicine, there is genuine alarm that we are marching backwards. The brain-drain has begun, with huge numbers of top scientists, as well as educators in the humanities, leaving our country for places where such knowledge is still respected.

There's more: remember the good old days when only bank robbers, muggers, and killers wore masks? Remember when there were no anonymous heavily armed Delta Force lookalikes stalking our streets? "That's not what people voted for," said conservative commentator David Urban. Legal analyst Andrew Napolitano, once on Trump's short-list for the Supreme Court: "The thought that ICE wants to break down doors without a search warrant is profoundly un-American and has been since the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791." Even podcaster Joe Rogan, who endorsed Trump's first term, said in dismay, "Are we

really gonna be the Gestapo?” and suggested that in 20 years Nick Fuentes, the radical white supremacist neo-Nazi --who met with Trump-- could "probably" become president.

Thus, a latent anti-intellectual strain in our culture has been strongly amplified by a profoundly ignorant president for whom gut feelings regularly “trump” reason. Having likened governing to being at war, he seeks to rule via intimidation, fear, and force. (He’s being mocked with an image of his new gold-laden battleship, the USS Bonespurs.)

Trump’s White House deputy chief of staff and speechwriter Stephen Miller recently uttered words that have longtime friends and allies fleeing in revulsion: “We live in a world that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time.” But it was the warmonger aggressors in WWII who had that very same horrific mindset, as does Russia, right now. It’s as if Trump and Miller can only imagine relating to other nations--and to most fellow Americans-- with authoritarian displays of dominance, with brutish glowering and clenched fists.

So, on July 4th, to celebrate the birth of our nation, Trump will host a bare-knuckle cage-fight on the White House lawn. He has tacked his own name onto the Kennedy Center for the Arts, but his fight-mentality has no respect for high learning: no regard for art and culture expressing unity, warmth, and noble aspirations. All that has been jettisoned. Trump and enablers can’t help showing that they truly are the deplorables, the barbarians --not just “at the gates” but inside.

A statement often attributed to Saint Augustine reminds us that such mentalities control things in our world only if we let them: “Hope has two beautiful daughters, anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to change them for the better.” May those words inspire us here and now.

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