

## **A Hypothetical Response to the Anti-Intellectualism on Display in the Comments of an Unrequited High School Crush's Facebook Post**

Re: "The power grab by liberals is no better than the power grab you feel Trump is trying. The only difference is they own the press and the re-education camp of liberal classrooms."

This ^^

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This ^^^^^^ woke me up in the middle of the night!

I don't know that we've ever exchanged more than eye contact (I was in your brother's year and used to have a crush on the guy you're having this one-sided debate with) and yet twelve (?) years after we last shared the same space, probably church on Christmas Eve, I couldn't sleep, thinking about you thinking this.

Because in college, I spent much more time consulting multiple sources, gathering evidence, and learning to form my own opinion than I did listening to lectures transmitting a single school of thought. This process often culminated in a paper, which itself usually required a thesis: one that challenged something, explored something more deeply, or asserted something new related to the old. My best papers didn't regurgitate their sources or pose ideas completely divorced from all evidence or previous thought; they engaged with what came before and added to it. They engaged with a shared reality, in all of its caveats and complexities.

Outside of my program, outside of the humanities, even, I imagine the story is similar: that students spend more time generating hypotheses and running experiments, more time critiquing the work of peers, more time challenging what someone else has asserted to be true, and more time confirming the seemingly obvious than they do taking notes on the way things are.

But you don't seem to think so. You frame education as something that begins and ends in an insular classroom: something bestowed on students, rather than a process that students undertake. But how does that square with my ability to gather and synthesize information (including conspiracy theories, btw) and to come to a different conclusion than you? To you, it's proof of my brainwashing; to me, it's proof of my ability to think critically.

It's puzzling. As puzzling as implying that the rituals of college and university life (namely: living, eating, and learning with strangers of different geographic histories, races, languages, cultures, religions, family structures, socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, identities, sexualities, and majors) are cultish. What system of uniformity is best described by its difference?

Look, maybe I'm jumping to conclusions. Maybe you aren't talking about higher education at all, but about the education required by the state: from 6-18, or roughly K-12. And in that case... let me walk this back. Because I do, in part, agree with you. My (our) rural Pennsylvania school was definitely not a fortress of the liberal elite. But it did encourage a single way of thinking -- or at least a single way of thinking about history.

Elementary, middle, and high-school history (or “social studies”) classrooms were defined not by exploration but by rote memorization and response. In the earliest years, we repeated:

*Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492.*  
*Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin.*

Later, the facts got longer but not much more complicated:

*Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for non-violence but was killed by a hateful single actor.*  
*Richard Nixon lied, was disgraced, and resigned.*  
*The American experiment in representative democracy created the greatest government in the world.*

The way we told these stories, too, was predictable, formulaic: AP US History papers were held to such a rigid standard that the rumor was that some students didn’t write any original text beyond the first and last paragraphs, because the teacher, seeing that you started and ended in his preferred style, would not even skim the middle.

The facts I learned, repeated, and wrote about are degrees of true. But I wasn’t taught that they were degrees of true until I got to college. Prior to that, history was not nuanced or slippery; it was what the textbook said. That’s the indoctrination I’m still struggling against. The idea that there’s a single answer, a single authority, a single history.

You’ve recognized that. You’ve come to sense that there’s something awful lurking beneath the surface. But you’ve replaced like with like. It’s the same old monolith in a different hat. I sense that there’s something awful lurking beneath the surface, too. Or more accurately, many somethings. Somethings that’ve always been crouching next to Eli and on top of Martin and under Richard. All they need is a light to be shined upon them -- a light, and someone interested in looking. At least for me, it was college that first encouraged that practice. Not re-education, but re-contextualization.

Maybe that’s too simplistic. Because after all, we each think we’re holding the light. But the thing about dramaturgs (I’m a dramaturg now) that feels like a leg up is that we don’t just go around shining lights on things and claiming that we’ve discovered the truth. We say, hey, how long has this been here? Did this thing behave differently in the dark than it does here in the light? Did someone once tell me about a thing just like this? Is my beam big enough to capture the whole, or am I only seeing the pupil of a whale? Is this the only thing of its kind, or is it part of a pattern that extends into the shadows? Who gave me this flashlight, anyway, and why’d they decide to put me in this room?

It’s hard to satisfy that level of curiosity with propaganda. And yet, according to you, it was born of it.

When I woke up, it wasn’t with a cold-sweat-nightmare feeling (though I know that rhetorical attacks on intellectuals have sometimes preceded actual attacks and that actual attacks have sometimes portended fascism). It wasn’t anger, or sadness, really. It was maybe a little bit of pettiness. But mostly, it was confusion: confusion at how two people, traveling parallel paths forward from a single point at the same speed, can land in such very different places. In a sub-comment, you mentioned that your strengths lie in math; maybe this is a problem I’d need your help to answer.

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