The Death of Expertise:
The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters

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A Review

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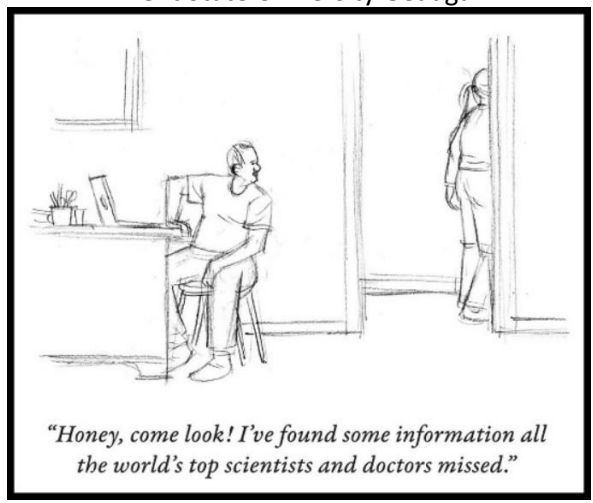

--The Lighter Side of Science

Tom Nichols sounds the alarm that Americans are sliding into the dangerous practice of refusing the established knowledge of experts, instead relying comfortably (and righteously) on dubious sources for "expert" information. They surf the Internet; listen to unreliable news sources, whose primary mission is to fan the flames of anti-intellectual rebellion; and, above all, they place their trust in gut feelings. This practice of deliberately ignoring expertise should be alarming, but it is not surprising.

The American character was shaped by the "rugged individualist" mythology in which our forebears depended on common sense know-how in order to thrive in the new world. To be truthful about our history, Americans have always cast a dubious eye toward book learning and intellectualism. Even the great 19th century Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (an intellectual and obsessive reader himself) wrote that he found answers to the great burning philosophical questions in Nature writ large. In

his seminal essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson advised to "trust yourself." How can we argue against his injunction, "insist on yourself; never imitate" (124)? Even his friend Henry David Thoreau (also a voracious reader) reported humbly about his two years living in the woods at Walden that "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately" because he feared that at the end of his life he might "discover that I had not lived" (65). Neither man rejected expertise—that would be a misinterpretation—but each depended foremost on his intellectual capability to inquire wisely. Inarguably, Americans are a different breed, suckled at the breast of stubborn independence. The stories about American self-reliance include the famous trailblazers Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and unnamed loner mountain men who eschewed civilization for the solitary frontier life. Even Mark Twain's Huck Finn "lit out for the territory" rather than become "sivilized" (296). Although there is much to be admired about these new Americans who were deeply influenced by landscape and native knowing, their unique insight unintentionally sowed the seeds of distrust and fomented a stubborn resistance to experts who have dedicated their lives to discover and share their expertise with the common folk.

Richard Hofstadter in 1963 presciently observed that "What used to be a jocular and usually benign ridicule of intellect and formal training has turned into a malign resentment of the intellectual capacity of expert." He warned that "Once the intellectual was gently ridiculed because he was not needed; now he is freely resented because he is needed too much" (qtd. in Nichols 18-19). Nichols asserts that the consequences is that "We do not have a healthy skepticism about experts; instead, we actively resent them, with many people assuming that experts are simply wrong simply by virtue of being experts" (xxii). "Experts," he says, "are not infallible"; "experts advise"; "experts, too, have an important responsibility in a democracy"; "experts have a responsibility to educate"; and, above all, "experts have an obligation to help" (10-12).

But experts, Nichols concedes, sometimes err, citing instances when they got it wrong. A case in point is the story of the University of Illinois history professor Richard Jenson, who insisted that prejudice against the newly arrived Irish were overblown. He argued that the "No Irish Need Apply" signs were simply "myths of victimization" (qtd in Nichols 170). Au contraire, said eighth-grader Rebecca Fried. How could Jensen get it wrong? Fried did some diligent homework. She found that "such signs existed, and they weren't that hard to find" (171). She went to the databases of old

newspapers where she found her proof, all the while wondering, "somebody had to have done this before, right?" (171). It turns out that it was Jensen who was guilty of sloppy research, and it was eighth-grader Rebecca Jenson who applied the intellectual tools of inquiry.

This is the elegance of research, and it in no way "proves" that the experts are always and definitively wrong. What it does prove is that research evolves, especially in the sciences, and that researchers are not averse to correction. "Science," says Nichols, "is also learning by doing" (176). One such example of a learning curve was the controversy about eggs causing too much cholesterol. "The egg scare was based on a cascade of flawed studies, some going back almost a half century" (172). On the advice of the experts, people stopped eating eggs, which turned out to invite other problems. Columnist Geoffrey Norman reported that egg consumption declined by 30%, but "People have to eat, so they substituted other things for eggs. Things that helped make them fat" (qtd. in Nichols 172). "Experts get things wrong all the time," asserts Nichols, but "This daily trust in professionals, however, is a prosaic matter of necessity" (174). In a recent CBS *Sunday Morning* interview, Gayle King asked whether comedian Chris Rock was willing to be vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus. He replied, "I can't wait! "I don't know what's in Tylenol when I get a headache? Yeah. I don't know what's in Tylenol, Gayle. I just know my headache's gone." Rock understands that professionals i.e., experts, are vetted. Nichols says that "Universities, accreditation organizations, licensing boards, certification authorities, state inspectors, and other institutions exist to maintain those standards" (174). He argues that "There isn't much anyone, including experts, can do about this kind of failure, because it is not so much failure as it is an integral part of science and scholarship. Laypeople are uncomfortable with ambiguity, and they prefer answers rather than caveats. But science is a process not a conclusion" (176).

During my first semester teaching at Kent State, a young student declared to all who would listen that his average-written paper deserved a better grade. He informed us all that his mother read his paper and told him it deserved an A. I don't recall how I answered him; I do remember not wanting to insult his mother. I also remember what I thought, and it had something to do with my doctoral degree and years of teaching experience compared to a well-meaning mother and her loyal son. These scenes, I suspect, are familiar to all of us who have spent years becoming expert in our fields of study. Nichols agrees. "Bashing colleges and universities is an

American tradition, as is bashing the faculty, like me, who teach them" (71). He examines what has gone wrong in our schools, arguing that "many of those American higher educational institutions are failing to provide their students the basic knowledge and skills that form expertise. More important, they are failing to provide the ability to *recognize* expertise and to engage productively with experts and other professionals in daily life" (72). This statement should give us pause. Instead of a college education, "colleges and universities now provide a full-service experience of 'going to college'" (72).

Can any of you remember when the change occurred—when students became "clients" or "consumers" instead of "students"? Instead of paying for a seat to get an opportunity to learn—and to fail—students now demand to pass, no matter how they perform. If a student cheats, nowadays the remedy is to haul in a parent, a principle from the local high school, or even a school board member, to demand that the instructor admit to dmaking a mistake (whatever that might be), not the student's. The instructor is now on the dean's radar as a less than desirable performer. Somehow the instance of a student cheating is not the student's fault but the instructor's for somehow letting it happen in the first place. Instead of a learner, the student is transformed into a full-fledged consumer. Nichols cites a Maryland junior high school teacher who resigned because school's defining slogans demanded that "students were not allowed to fail," and If they have D's or F's there is something wrong that you are not doing for them" (78).

The learning experience is no longer the goal, the "going to college" experience is. Alarmingly, more unprepared students find themselves warming a seat in the university classroom. They range from young high-schoolers who are not emotionally mature enough to adjust to their new environment, one that emphasizes studying over socializing; to students who were passed through their high school years, only to find themselves intellectually far behind in college. These types of students fail to understand that "College is supposed to be an uncomfortable experience. It is where a person leaves behind the rote learning of childhood and accepts the anxiety, discomfort, and challenge of complexity that leads to the acquisition of deeper knowledge—hopefully for a lifetime" (76). Every person should be able to go to college if he or she desires it and is eager and capable to learn. But Nichols argues that "not everyone should go to college. This is one of those things professors are not supposed to say in

polite company, but it's true" (74). He points out that "Young people who might have done better in a trade sign up for college without a lot of thought given to how to graduate, or what they'll do when it all ends" (74).

We all have experienced students who come into our classroom "not knowing." They are welcomed because this is what education is all about: to change the "not knowing" into "inquiry," "learning," and "surprise." The college and university doors should be flung wide open for such students, the ones who have a fire in the belly, that real desire to learn. In return, however, students must recognize their professors' expertise and respect them for it. They must be ready for all forms of intellectual discourse: to question, to converse, to agree or disagree, but to do so from a position of accumulated evidence, not gut feeling. A regional campus English professor at Kent State likes to tell the story about the student who accused him of being subjective about grading his paper. The professor answered, "Yes, I am subjective. I read and graded the paper based on my education and years of experience" (my paraphrase). Nichols tells a similar story about a university professor who argued from the position that Reagan's "Star Wars" program was important and should be kept. The student who argued against the program countered that "your guess is as good as mine." The professor answered, "No, no, no . . . My guesses are much, *much* better than yours" (83). Nichols concludes that "If they've spent four years showing such disrespect for their professors and their institutions, they cannot be expected to respect their fellow citizens. And if college graduates can no longer be counted on to lead reasoned debate and discussion in American life, and to know the difference between knowledge and feeling, then we're indeed in the kind of deep trouble no experts can fix" (104).

We all know about Holocaust deniers, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In fact, General Eisenhower insisted that the liberation of the camps be filmed exactly for that reason: he knew there would be deniers. Although deeply disturbing for sure, these deniers were once relegated to the back burner as a kook minority because social media platforms were then not existent. Today, through the proliferation of media such as Facebook, Twitter, and the Internet (including dark Internet sites), the minority have found the like-minded and have thrust themselves into the mainstream of American discourse, pushing unfounded (and frankly crazy) ideas that alien reptilians have infiltrated American government, Democrats enslave children in nonexistent pizza restaurant basements and

practice pedophilia, and that Jewish space lasers were aimed to zap forest fires in California.

Indeed, we are in deep trouble.

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