

NOTEBOOK

A Quibble By Mark Slouka

We have every reason to be pleased with ourselves. Bucking all recent precedent, we seem to have put a self-possessed, intelligent man in the White House who, if he manages to avoid being bronzed before his first hundred days are up, may actually succeed in correcting the course of empire. The bubble is rushing back to plumb; excitement is in the air. It would be churlish to quibble.

Still, let's. Although the guard at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue has indisputably changed, although the new boss is not the same as the old boss, I'm less certain about us. I'd like to believe that we're a different people now; that we're more educated, more skeptical, more tough-minded than we were when we gave the outgoing gang of criminals enough votes to steal the presidential election, twice, but it's hard work; actual human beings keep getting in the way.

My neighbor, a high school teacher living about an hour outside New York City, wants to torture a terrorist. He's worried because he believes that Osama—excuse me, Obama—cares more about terrorists than he does about us. He's never heard of the Spanish Inquisition. Another neighbor—an actual plumber, actually named Joe—wants Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* tossed out of the high school library. Joe came by recently. Did I want my kids learning how to curse and kill dogs and commit adultery? he asked. I said that my kids already knew how to curse, and that I hadn't realized that killing

dogs and committing adultery were things you had to learn. He showed me the book. He and his wife had gone through it with a blue highlighter and highlighted the words “crap,” “shit,” and “damn” every time they appeared, on every page. They'd written to Laura Bush about it, and received a supportive letter in return, signed by the first lady. “You're a teacher,” he said. “Don't tell me you support this kind of filth.” I asked him if he'd read it. Well, no, he said, but he knew what it was about. He didn't really go in for reading, himself, he said.

I like a party as much as the next man, and I still have moments when I realize that the bastards are really, truly out and think that maybe, this time, it really is morning in America, but a voice from outside the ether cone keeps whispering that we haven't changed at all, that we're as dangerous to ourselves as we've ever been, and that the relative closeness of the popular vote in this last election (given the almost embarrassing superiority of the winning ticket and the parade of catastrophes visited on the nation by the outgoing party) proves it. Go ahead and bask, this voice says, but that rumble you hear above the drums and the partymakers is real, and it's coming our way.

What we need to talk about, what someone needs to talk about, particularly now, is our ever-deepening ignorance (of politics, of foreign languages, of history, of science, of current affairs, of pretty much everything) and not just our ignorance but our complacency in the face of it, our growing fondness for it. A generation ago the

proof of our foolishness, held up to our faces, might still have elicited some redeeming twinge of shame—no longer. Today, across vast swaths of the republic, it amuses and comforts us. We're deeply loyal to it. Ignorance gives us a sense of community; it confers citizenship; our representatives either share it or bow down to it or risk our wrath.

Seen from a sufficient distance (a decade abroad, for example), or viewed through a protective filter, like film, or alcohol, there can be something almost endearing about it. It can appear quaint, part of our foolish-but-authentic, naive-yet-sincere, rough-hewn spirit. Up close and personal, unromanticized and unfiltered, it's another thing entirely. In the flesh, barking from the electronic pulpit or braying back from the audience, our ignorance can be sobering. We don't know. Or much care. Or care to know.

What do we care about? We care about auto racing and Jessica. We care about food, oh yes, please, very much. And money. (Did you catch the last episode of *I Love Money*?) We care about Jesus, though we're a bit vague on his teachings. And America. We care about America. And the flag. And the troops, though we're untroubled by the fact that the Bush Administration lied us into the conflict, then spent years figuring out that armor in war might be a good idea. Did I mention money?

Here's the mirror—look and wince. One out of every four of us believes we've been reincarnated; 44 percent of us believe in ghosts; 71 percent, in angels. Forty percent of us believe God created all things in their present form sometime during the last 10,000 years.

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Nearly the same number—not coincidentally, perhaps—are functionally illiterate. Twenty percent think the sun might revolve around the earth. When one of us writes a book explaining that our offspring are bored and disruptive in class because they have an indigo “vibrational aura” that means they are a gifted race sent to this planet to change our consciousness with the help of guides from a higher world, half a million of us rush to the bookstores to lay our money down.

Wherever it may have resided before, the brain in America has migrated to the region of the belt—not below it, which might at least be diverting, but only as far as the gut—where it has come to a stop. The gut tells us things. It tells us what’s right and what’s wrong, who to hate and what to believe and who to vote for. Increasingly, it’s where American politics is done. All we have to do is listen to it and the answer appears in the little window of the eight ball: “Don’t trust him. Don’t know. Undecided. Just because, that’s why.” We know because we feel, as if truth were a matter of personal taste, or something to be divined in the human heart, like love.

I was raised to be ashamed of my ignorance, and to try to do something about it if at all possible. I carry that burden to this day, and have successfully passed it on to my children. I don’t believe I have the right to an opinion about something I know nothing about—constitutional law, for example, or sailing—a notion that puts me sadly out of step with a growing majority of my countrymen, many of whom may be unable to tell you anything at all about Islam, say, or socialism, or climate change, except that they hate it, are against it, don’t believe in it. Worse still (or more amusing, depending on the day) are those who *can* tell you, and then offer up a stew of New Age blather, right-wing rant, and bloggers’ speculation that’s so divorced from actual, demonstrable fact, that’s so not true, as the kids would say, that the mind goes numb with wonder. “Way I see it is,” a man in the Tulsa Motel 6 swimming pool told me last summer, “if English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for us.”

Quite possibly, this belief in our own opinion, regardless of the facts, may

be what separates us from the nations of the world, what makes us unique in God’s eyes. The average German or Czech, though possibly no less ignorant than his American counterpart, will probably consider the possibility that someone who has spent his life studying something may have an opinion worth considering. Not the American. Although perfectly willing to recognize expertise in basketball, for example, or refrigerator repair, when it comes to the realm of ideas, all folks (and their opinions) are suddenly equal. Thus evolution is a damned lie, global warming a liberal hoax, and Republicans care about people like you.

But there’s more. Not only do we believe that opinion (our own) trumps expertise; we then go further and demand that expertise assume the position—demand, that is, that those with actual knowledge supplicate themselves to the Believers, who don’t need to know. The logic here, if that’s the term, seems to rest on the a priori conviction that belief and knowledge are separate and unequal. Belief is higher, nobler; it comes from the heart; it feels like truth. There’s a kind of Biblical grandeur to it, and as God’s chosen, we have an inherent right to it. Knowledge, on the other hand, is impersonal, easily manipulated, inherently suspect. Like the facts it’s based on, it’s slippery, insubstantial—not solid like the things you believe.

The corollary to the axiom that belief beats knowledge, of course, is that ordinary folks shouldn’t value the latter too highly, and should be suspicious of those who do. Which may explain our inherent discomfort with argument. We may not know much, but at least we know what we believe. Tricky elitists, on the other hand, are always going on. Confusing things. We don’t trust them. So what if Sarah Palin couldn’t answer Charlie Gibson’s sneaky question about the Bush

Doctrine? We didn’t know what it was either.

How did we come to this pass? We could blame the American education system, I suppose, which has been retooled over the past two generations to churn out workers (badly), not skeptical, informed citizens. Or we could look to the great wasteland

of television, whose homogenizing force and narcotizing effect has quite neatly corresponded to the rising tide of ignorance. Or we could spend some time analyzing the fungus of associations that has grown around the word “elitist,” which can now be applied to a teacher driving a thirteen-year-old Toyota but not to a multimillionaire CEO like Dick Cheney. Or, finally, we might look to the influence of the anti-elitist elites who, burdened by the weight of their Ph.D.s, will argue that the words “educated” and “ignorant” are just signifiers of class employed by the oligarchy to keep the underprivileged in their place, and then proceed to tell you how well Bobby is doing at Princeton.

But I’m less interested in the ingredients of this meal than in who’s going to have to eat it, and when, and at what cost. There’s no particular reason to believe, after all, that things will improve; that our ignorance and gullibility will miraculously abate, that the militant right and the entrenched left, both so given to caricature, will simultaneously emerge from their bunkers eager to embrace complexity, that our disdain for facts and our aversion to argument will reverse themselves. Precisely the opposite is likely. In fact, if we take the wider view, and compare today’s political climate (the arrogance with which our leaders now conduct their extralegal adventures, the crudity of the propaganda used to manipulate us, our increasing willingness to cheer the lie and spit on the truth, just so long as the lie is ours) to that of even a generation ago, then extend the curve a decade or two into the future, it’s easier to imagine a Balkanized nation split into rival camps cheered and sustained by their own propaganda than the republic of reason and truth so many of us want to believe in.

Traditions die hard, after all. Anti-intellectualism in America is a very old hat—a stovepipe, at least, maybe even a coonskin. We wear it well; we’re unlikely to give it up just like that. Consider, for example, what happens to men or women (today as ever) the minute they declare themselves candidates for office, how their language—their syntax, their level of diction, the field from which their analogies are

drawn—takes a nosedive into the common pool. Notice how quickly the contractions creep in and the sleeves roll up. The comparison to high school seems appropriate; the pressure to adapt is considerable, and it's all in one direction—down. In American politics, as in the cafeteria, the crowd sets the tone. It doesn't know much, and if you want in, you'd better not either. Should you want out, of course, all you have to do is inadvertently let on—for example, by using the word “inadvertently”—that you're a reasonably educated human being, and the deed is done.

Communicate intelligently in America and you're immediately suspect. As one voter from Alaska expressed it last fall, speaking of Obama, “He just seems snotty, and he looks weaselly.” This isn't race talking; it's education. There's something sneaky about a man like Obama (or even John Kerry, who, though no Disraeli, could construct a sentence in English with a beginning, a middle, and an end), because he seems intelligent. It makes people uneasy. Who knows what he might be thinking?

But doesn't this past election, then, sound the all clear? Doesn't the fact that Obama didn't have to lower himself to win suggest that the ignorant are outnumbered? Can't we simply ignore the third of white evangelicals who believe the world will end in their lifetimes, or the millennialists who know that Obama's the Antichrist because the winning lottery number in Illinois was 666?

For starters, consider how easily things might have gone the other way had the political and economic climate not combined into a perfect political storm for the Republican Party; had the Dow been a thousand points higher in September, or gas a dollar cheaper. Truth is, we got lucky; the bullet grazed our skull.

Next, consider the numbers. Of the approximately 130 million Americans who voted this past November, very nearly half, seemingly stuck in political puberty, were untroubled by the possibility of Sarah Palin and the first dude inheriting the White House. At the same time, those of us on the winning side might want to do a cross-check before landing. How

many of us—not just in the general election but in the primaries, when there was still a choice—voted for Obama because he was the It thing this season, because he was so likable, because he had that wonderful voice, because he was black, because he made us feel as if Atticus Finch had come home? If nothing else, the fact that so many have convinced themselves that one man, thus far almost entirely untested, will slay the culture of corruption with one hand while pulling us out of the greatest mess we've known in a century with the other suggests that a certain kind of “clap your hands if you believe” naïveté crosses the aisle at will.

But the electorate, whatever its issues, is not the real problem. The real problem, the unacknowledged pit underlying American democracy, is the 38 percent of the population who didn't move, didn't vote. Think of it: a country the size of Germany—83 million people—within our own borders. Many of its citizens, after decades of watching the status quo perpetuate itself, are presumably too fed up to bother, a stance we can sympathize with and still condemn for its petulance and immaturity, its unwillingness to acknowledge the fact that in every election there is a better and a worse choice. Millions of others, however, are adults who don't know what the Bill of Rights is, who have never heard of Lenin, who think Africa is a nation, who have never read a book. I've talked to enough of them to know that many are decent people, and that decency is not enough. Witches are put to the stake by decent people. Ignorance trumps decency any day of the week.

Praise me for a citizen or warm up the pillory, it comes down to the unpleasant fact that a significant number of our fellow citizens are now as greedy and gullible as a boxful of puppies; they'll believe anything; they'll attack the empty glove; they'll follow that plastic bone right off the cliff. Nothing about this election has changed that fact. If they're ever activated—if the wrong individual gets to them, in other words, before the educational system does—we may live to experience a tyranny of the majority Tocqueville never imagined. ■



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