

Phi Beta Kappa Address

March 20, 2005

In a Pulitzer-Prize winning book, published in 1962, Richard Hofstadter traced the long history of what he called “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life.” After citing such examples as the attacks on intellectualized Christianity launched by Great Awakening revivalist preachers in the mid-18th century and on highly educated politicians by the populist supporters of Andrew Jackson in the early 19th, Hofstadter goes on to mention the deft characterization of the bald Adlai Stevenson as an “egghead” by the Eisenhower campaigns of the 1950s and George Wallace’s widely-quoted reference during the Presidential campaign of 1968 to “pointy-headed intellectuals who couldn’t park a bicycle straight.” Had Hofstadter’s book been published in 2005, he might have included among such anecdotes the recent response of Karl Rove, President Bush’s leading political advisor, to the news that, while college graduates as a group tend to tilt Republican, those with advanced degrees tend to tilt Democratic. According to Rove, this fact clearly proves that, when it comes to education, there can be “too much of a good thing.” As Hofstadter shows and as recent political history confirms, American politicians and other leaders have frequently made adroit use of anti-intellectual feeling to advance their causes. Since these leaders themselves are sometimes well educated, one wonders how genuine their anti-intellectualism is. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of their maneuver suggests they’re tapping into a genuine feeling in large numbers of Americans.

Further evidence of American anti-intellectualism is likely provided by the half-hearted support given to higher education in most states, including Ohio. Though the struggling Ohio

economy is partly to blame, it's clear from the comments of state legislators that one reason higher education in Ohio is receiving less and less state support is their conviction that such education is a luxury that can be made available to an elite in flush times but should be sacrificed in times of belt-tightening—especially when, as one member of the Ohio House clearly believes—Ohio's professors are imposing an idiosyncratic and unpatriotic ideology on their students. There they go again, one can imagine many of Ohio's legislators and voters thinking: those darn intellectuals. Or consider the attack recently made with some success by student groups at BGSU on the granting of priority registration to Honors students. As I learned while serving as Honors Director, it's not easy to convince non-Honors students that the bright should be given special privileges. After all, isn't it already easier for them to make As?

Where does American anti-intellectualism come from? Hofstadter traces this phenomenon to a variety of causes, including the premium put on emotion rather than reason by American religion, the American investment in the idea of equality, as enshrined in the principle of one man, one vote, and the widening gulf between “experts” (particularly in science) and ordinary people. Hofstadter might have added to this very plausible list the traditional admiration of Americans for fame and fortune rather than academic success, their continuing admiration for unintellectual billionaire entrepreneurs and not very brainy movie stars, and their tendency to value a college degree primarily for its earning power. There may also be more subtle psychological causes for anti-intellectualism, of course: simple envy of the intelligent or frustration over academic nonsuccess.

But I believe that before we dismiss American anti-intellectualism as simply an occasional tool of political manipulation or a symptom of intellectual insecurity or cultural shallowness, we should seriously consider the unpleasant possibility that, despite their

sometimes dishonest or unhealthy reasons for making it, the anti-intellectuals have a point. I would suggest, in fact, that there is a considerable amount of truth in their stereotyping of the intellectual as having sacrificed common sense for intellectuality, as having lost contact with and interest in the fundamental needs and desires of ordinary humanity, and as having disappeared into a fog of arcane and useless knowledge.

I think that the anti-intellectuals are at least partly right for four reasons. First, many intellectuals have lost the ability to communicate the nature and significance of their research--not only to non-intellectuals but even to their colleagues. Here's a paragraph from a book on Gothic fiction I tried to read over the Christmas break in preparation for teaching a springtime course on Edgar Allan Poe:

The notion of haunting exists in this curious space between realization and its opposite. By the body we may be all too easily contaminated, as, for example, the Restoration dramatists were no less aware than we are now; but if we are to admit to an originary infection, to see that in the end our myths of origin are flawed, that there are areas through which the unknown and the unsolicited may none the less stray, then we need to find a form of being which carries all the terrifying weight of infection while eschewing the bodily; thus the haunting, thus the nature of the ghost. The ghost comes to menace the bodily with its limitations; but it also comes to celebrate the loss of the body, just as, in all textuality, we are invited to be in the presence of simultaneous celebration and mourning of loss, the loss, we might say, of the "text instead," the text, always more perfect, more preserved from arbitrary incursion than the text we have, in any "reasonable" or daylight scenario, succeeded in writing or reading ourselves; or,

therefore, any “selves” we may have succeeded in producing, reproducing, “reading” under these curiously limited conditions in which dreams and ghosts, therefore the forms of our memories themselves, are disavowed.

This was the third paragraph of the book; I’m afraid I didn’t get much further. I thought the author probably had something to say—and I sort of saw what that was—but I didn’t have an hour to devote to each paragraph of a two hundred page book. I also had the vague fear that the author might be just pulling my leg. In any case, as this randomly chosen paragraph illustrates, my own field of literary criticism has lately been particularly damaged by the triumph of jargon and obfuscation—and the narrowing of the audience to which books and articles are addressed. But literary critics are certainly not the only scholars who have tended, especially lately, to lose their ability to explain, not only to the uninitiated but even to their own peers, precisely what they’re up to. In a sense, my colleagues in English have simply managed to catch up, finally, as a result of great effort, with their unintelligible colleagues in other fields.

But I think that intellectuals like ourselves have more than a communication problem. I think that we tend to become so fascinated by our research questions—and so enmeshed in the intellectual debates within our fields—that we lose perspective on our research enterprises. Why are we studying what we’re studying? As Honors Director, I regularly helped outstanding BGSU science majors prepare their Goldwater Scholarship applications—and remember the difficulty nearly all of them had in drafting the first paragraphs of their research project descriptions: the paragraphs in which they were supposed to explain the significance of their projects. Though their projects were demonstrably significant, it was as if they’d never thought to ask if they were. I also remember, as a graduate student in Cornell, seeing some of my closest

graduate-student friends selecting topics for their dissertations that seemed to me (and still seem to me) utterly insignificant. Fortunately, I encountered a professor at Cornell who encouraged his students to believe that all the important American literary questions remained unanswered—and that only those questions deserved consideration. Important things remained to be said, he insisted and demonstrated, about *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*. Important writers remained to be discovered and interpreted, he declared. I'm addressing an audience of young intellectuals today, who may imagine that futures of infinite length lie before them. But you'll soon discover that life is short—and that it is thus crucial to address only the most important questions, rather than the myriad of others to which you might turn. A few years ago, I was disturbed by an article that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and which was quickly exploited by anti-intellectuals, that noted that while more than 60% of published medical research and more than 50% of research in the natural sciences was cited (in scholarly books and articles) within five years of its publication, only a third of social science research generated any response. But most disturbing for an English professor was the news that only 2% of humanities research did. What an incentive to contribute further articles to my field! And if scholars in philosophy, history, English, music history, art history, and so on weren't reading the research of their own colleagues, one could only imagine how minimal an impact this research was having on American society. Why was this research being ignored? Though one might list many plausible reasons, I would suggest that most of it is not only "haunted" by incomprehensibility but doomed by triviality. I believe that statistics like the above help to explain how intellectuals have earned the disdain and distrust of our society. It would respect us a lot more if we regularly assessed the significance of our own research and creative projects, were genuinely convinced of the value of what we're doing, and could clearly explain that value to others.

Finally, I would like to address what seem to me two other problematical traits of intellectual, the first being our very fondness for intellectual activity. How greatly we enjoy reasoning, analysis, investigation, and interpretation for their own sakes—and how often we thus unsuit ourselves for the leadership roles we might assume in society. Five years ago I was called for jury duty at the Wood County Court House. The defendant had been accused of murdering a fellow drug dealer in Perrysburg. Nearly fifty potential jurors had been ordered to appear. I remember waiting all morning as others were called to the jury box, questioned by either the prosecution or defense or both, and either selected for service or dismissed. Finally, in mid-afternoon, I was called. I was excited, too. The case sounded interesting. I'd noticed that the defense attorney had very long hair and looked as if he were still living in the 60s; I wondered if he would be credible with the jury. I'd also noticed that the defendant was the only African American in a room otherwise filled by sixty white people. I realized, too, that I knew the County Prosecutor from church—and enjoyed seeing him in professional action. These details genuinely interested me. The juror seated to my left, a pleasant farmer with whom I'd chatted all day, asked to be dismissed so as to return to his harvest. His request was granted. I was questioned next.

When the lead prosecutor asked me what I thought of serving on the jury, I said I would enjoy serving on it. I said it was my civic duty to serve—and added that I thought the case would be interesting. When I admitted that I knew the County Prosecutor, I thought I might be dismissed by the defense. But a minute later I was abruptly dismissed by the prosecution. I was very disappointed. The next day, however, when I told my story to a young friend who worked in the Prosecutor's office, he said that I shouldn't have been surprised or disappointed—that his office never allowed a professor to serve on the jury in a murder case. Professors, he said, were

far too likely to see both sides of an issue, to sympathize with both the victim and the accused, to have an overly high standard for reasonable doubt—and to be able to create doubts in others. It was the kiss of prosecutorial death to leave a professor on a murder jury. Though this news somewhat alleviated my feelings of personal failure, it nevertheless depressed me. It was disturbing to think that my society viewed my choice of profession—and intellectuality—as liabilities when it came time to make a firm moral decision and administer justice. But what really disturbed me was the possibility that the prosecution had been right about me. I had wanted to serve on the jury not primarily in order to be a responsible citizen or to provide the leadership my intellectuality might have provided but because I had found the case interesting. I'd thought it would be fun to think about. I hadn't really taken it—or my potential leadership role as an intellectual—seriously. Thus I hadn't been given the opportunity to play that role. The farmer—with his sturdy good humor and common sense—might well have made a better juror than intellectual me.

Moreover, after being rightly rejected by society, I probably went home to grade papers or continue reading the Melville article I hadn't finished the night before, thus illustrating one last problem with us intellectuals—our love of intellectual seclusion. How greatly we enjoy our armchairs and books, our laboratory tables, our library carels, our professional conferences, our intimate debates with colleagues. How happily we retreat from the complexities and frustrations of society into the quiet and controllable realm of research and thought. But thus how often, in retreating into this realm, we evade our leadership responsibilities as intellectuals. I'm sure that most of the initiates here at least occasionally share my habit of exploiting intellectual activity as a haven amidst the storms of life. When another suicide bomber strikes in Iraq or the dollar falls or steroid use is exposed, how pleasant it is to turn off the news and retreat into a good novel—or

the chemistry lab—or a set of particularly promising survey data. But Thomas Jefferson optimistically suggested in a famous letter to John Adams that America would thrive because a “natural aristocracy” would regularly be chosen to lead American society and government, an aristocracy presumably composed of wise, moral, and publicly engaged intellectuals like Adams and himself. Jefferson was indeed an intellectual, whose learning is clearly visible in the Declaration of Independence he helped to draft. He also had an intellectual’s love of philosophical contemplation and scientific investigation. How greatly he enjoyed the intellectual seclusion provided by Monticello. But when he was urged by supporters to leave that seclusion and enter the fray of Presidential politics in 1800, he reluctantly did so, accepting his intellectual responsibility to lead others. I know that today’s initiates are here partly because of their maturity, motivation, and hard work. All of you can remember Friday evenings when you stayed at your desk, writing that political science paper, or hung out in the invertebrate lab long after your professor had gone home, or postponed a rendezvous with that hot guy or girl on your floor in order to watch C-Span. Well, that final example may be a little farfetched! But, despite all your hard work and dedication, all of you would have to admit that your success at Bowling Green has resulted in large part from your genetic inheritance from your parents, just as their success did. Thus just as your intelligence was an empowering and joy-bringing gift to you, so has your academic success been such a gift. I believe that gifts come to us for a reason. They’re meant to be used for the benefit of others. In your future careers, I hope that each of you will retain the ability to communicate the significance of your intellectual projects to the public at large, continue to question the significance of your projects and select ever more significant ones, and, above all, endeavor to make your intellectuality a tool of public leadership rather than a private Play Station. Accept leadership roles in organizations. Run for office if you dare.

Attempt to influence others for the better through the breadth of your knowledge, the carefulness and sophistication of your thinking, and the depth of your social commitment. Find intellectual ways of addressing the issues facing society. I think that if we all make headway on these fronts, we will have a much better chance of wiping out the stereotype of the egghead and earning the respect of our society. And if we do, it will be a very good thing. For though for a variety of reasons, it would rather not admit it, that society, as Jefferson recognized, desperately needs us.

I want to congratulate all the initiates here today for their academic accomplishments. Being elected to Phi Beta Kappa is a truly meaningful honor, one of the greatest any undergraduate student can earn. It suggests that, far from squandering the intellectual resources you've been given by your parents, you've appreciated them, nurtured them, and put them to good use. Despite what other students might think, it wasn't easy to earn all those As. Wouldn't it be exhausting to count all the papers you've had to write at Bowling Green, all the mid-terms you've had to take, and all the professors you've had to figure out? I also want to congratulate all the parents here today, who've given these initiates far more than a valuable genetic inheritance. You've given them the love and support they needed in order to excel. I can remember how proud my own parents were of my younger brother's and my memberships in Phi Beta Kappa—and how much my mother cherished her sons' Phi Beta Kappa keys, which she kept in her jewelry box and loved to show to others. All the parents here today should be equally pleased and proud.

I apologize to both the initiates and their parents for having criticized today many of the intellectual activities and tendencies for which Phi Beta Kappa members are famous. But I would offer as a precedent for my remarks Ralph Waldo Emerson's speech to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, in which he rudely questioned most of the fundamental tenets of

Christianity. Needless to say, he was not invited back. But the Divinity School should have known better than to invite Emerson to speak. A year earlier, on August 31, 1837, he had addressed Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa society and warned the student members of the serious threat posed by books and reading to their intellectual development. You'll notice, that, as an English professor, I didn't go THAT far.

Allan Emery