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One-Day U

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Maybe it was because I had just helped my daughter move into her freshman dorm room and I was envious of the deliciously named courses she was thinking of taking. Or maybe it was because I've always been a sucker for pitches like "Conversational Hebrew in One Day!" Or maybe it was because I didn't know what else to do with my rage about the anti-intellectual matches that the Republican presidential campaign is playing with.

Whatever the reason, I was a sitting duck for a publicist's offer to comp me to the first "One Day University" in Los Angeles. Judging from the full house paying \$259 a pop at the Skirball's Magnin Auditorium, I wasn't alone.

The lineup included teachers from Columbia, Harvard, Dartmouth and USC. The subjects were Lincoln, the psychology of happiness, the history of cosmology and the foreign policies of an Obama or a McCain administration. The audience included not only the retirees seeking educational nourishment and brain fitness whom I had expected, but also boomers like me and more than a few people who looked to be in their 40s and 30s and even younger.

Three out of the four speakers really knew how to work a room, making good on the publicist's promise of a day of engaging "edutainment," and the fourth — even though, unlike the others, he worked from a prepared text and never left his spot behind the lectern — nevertheless held people's attention with his material.

All day long, while learning things like the average age for the first onset of depression (14 1/2, compared to twice that a generation ago), and the proportion of the universe containing carbon, oxygen and nitrogen, the elements that people are made of (less than 1 percent), I kept wondering what bound us students together, besides our common jones for knowledge.

The answer came home to me during the foreign policy lecture by my friend and USC colleague, professor Steven Lamy.

In the midst of providing an analytic framework for understanding the traditions and belief systems of U.S. foreign policy, he pointed out the substantive poverty of the discussion of foreign policy occurring during this campaign, despite so many grave foreign policy issues that will face the next president. Security challenges and security strategies? Yes, those are in the campaign mix. But dealing realistically with the global economy, or thinking creatively about using the U.S.'s non-military power, or grappling with the social threat that traditional cultures see posed by the massive exportation of American entertainment, or with the environmental threat posed by exporting our consumerist culture: issues like these — not so much, or not at all.

The reason for this neglect is that the conduct of foreign policy is now all about electoral considerations, and the majority of the American people return the favor by not paying attention to it. The result, says Steve Lamy, is an uninformed American public easily manipulated by power players in Washington who prefer that the wide range of options potentially available for America's role in the world not be put on the table for scrutiny.

The irony is that there is a rising generation that does see foreign policy as something more than shouting, "9-11!" At USC, as Steve pointed out, the 791 undergraduates majoring in international relations — one of the most popular majors in the college — do know what the Bush doctrine is.

Which brings me to the thread binding the newest alumni of One Day U. Yes, I could be projecting my own feelings onto them. But from the questions they asked the faculty, from conversations I heard during breaks, from the room's reaction to Steve Lamy's mention of the foreign policy credential claimed by Sarah Palin with a straight face (you can see Russia from an island in Alaska), I had the strong impression that the people in that auditorium were connected by a common sense of outrage at the demonization of learning going on in this campaign.

To be sure, every campaign, in both parties, relies on bumper-sticker slogans and 30-second ads, and, at least since the 1980s, television has proven itself dismally unequal to the opportunity for covering a campaign as a national conversation about the big issues facing the country.

Yet the way the McCain campaign has turned "elite" into a dirty word, and delightedly derided Obama's education as effete, and turned the sow's ear of Sarah Palin's lack of foreign policy experience into the silk purse of salt-of-the-earth small town values — you have to go back to Spiro Agnew and his bullyboy ventriloquists, Pat Buchanan and William Safire, to find this kind of sneering contempt for educated people.

The neoconservative intellectuals who have fanned these fires have particularly dirty hands. With their Ivy League degrees and their perches as columnists and commentators, their collaboration with the Republican defamation of learning is especially unctuous. By being accomplices to what is arguably the most lying campaign in modern history, they are complicit with the same noxious rejection of reason that has brought us the teaching of “intelligent design” (aka creationism) in our schools; the politicization of science in everything from climate change to environmental regulations; and the intrusion of fundamentalist religious doctrines into the shaping of public policy.

I see adult education as a political act, a refutation of this neo-Know Nothingism. I see reading a good newspaper as a thumb in the eye to this anti-intellectual hypocrisy and to candidates who refuse to hold press conferences. I see the conversation occurring in some online precincts, and among people who have abandoned cable news for actual discussions about issues they care about, as a patriotic response to the political porn served up to us by mainstream media. I see studying and going to the best school you can and learning to think critically as a powerful antidote to the homespun yahooism that is being held up to us as the gold standard of competence.

Sure, some people may have signed up for One Day U because it looked like fun, or to get out of the house, or just because they were curious. But curiosity is a quality that has been lethally absent in the occupant of the White House these last eight years, and if you listen to the team that could well replace him, having a healthy intellectual appetite is wussily un-American.

I don't doubt that Americans who love learning may constitute a minority. I just hope that enough of them live in battleground states to make a difference.

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