

Brain Drain

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Les propos de MC Miller n'engagent que lui même et ne sont en rien une expression des vues de la rédaction.

1 ©Context 2001

What is your Department? It has to be
Prevarication going back to Age of Pericles!!!! You
didn't go to Yale with your hero Clinton did you or
maybe Harvard with Gore????

—from ERKTHE@aol.com, 6/13/01

I didn't go to Yale with Clinton—who is not my
hero—OR with Bush, and I didn't go to Harvard
with Gore OR Bush. I went to Northwestern.

Do you have a point to make, or a serious question
to ask? Or would you rather just hurl insults? Is
that your idea of rational debate?

—from mcm7@pop.nyu.edu, 6/13/01

2 Any academic who wants to learn about American anti-intellectualism has two ways to go. On the one hand, you can take the pastoral route, and delve into the problem as an intellectual—reading, in the quiet of your armchair, Hofstadter's classic dissertation, say, and/or Dan T. Carter's fine biography of George Wallace, and/or any other such enlightening work. Or you can drop the books, put on your goggles and your rubber boots, and venture forth into the endless shitstorm that is now our civic culture, and in that deluge try to make a reasonable argument. You do that, and you will quickly learn a lot—more, in fact, than you might pick up just by reading, and, perhaps, a lot more than you bargained for.

- 3 Although it got much riskier on 9/11, the latter course of study was already pretty harrowing; I'd taken it (and without knowing it) when, in June, I started to promote *The Bush Dyslexicon*—a dark assessment of George W. Bush, and an indictment of the US major media, based on meticulous analysis both of Bush's off-the-cuff remarks and of their treatment by the stalwarts of the media. Because the book got few reviews (no big surprise), I tried to do as Richard Nixon did in 1952: I "took my case directly to the people"—not, of course, through truculent prime-time asides about my dog, but by doing as much talk radio as possible, to tell the audience what, by studying his utterances, I had discovered deep in the heart of W, and at the top of our defunct democracy.
- 4 What I had discovered was not flattering to Bush. Close study of his jabberings not only reconfirms the fact of his supreme unfitness for the presidential job (a fact that even certain of his own supporters grudgingly conceded, prior to 9/11), but also throws into relief that bone-deep nastiness which all the spin about his "likeability" could never quite obscure. His thin skin, his short fuse, his elephantine memory for slights (and quickness to imagine them), and—above all—his perfect lack of empathy shine through in countless of his gaffes, and in most of his jokes. It is (or so I argue in the book) all there in the man's own utterances, which, in cold print, are every bit as edifying as the propaganda drive on his behalf was mystifying.
- 5 Once I started to promote the book, I learned that Bush's psychopathic traits exert a strong appeal to his most zealous fans, many of whom took full advantage of the first-strike capabilities of cyber-space to let me know their thoughts. For example, I received this e-mail in mid-August—just after W's big speech on stem cell research—with "THE BUSH DYSLEXICON" written in the subject line:
- Mark...
- I just finished your above-named book (borrowed it, wouldn't buy it) and it confirms my suspicion that you are a typical left-wing jerkoff!!! Did you happen to catch Bush's speech last night...he really put it up your left-wing asshole...asshole!
- Fred Fittin.
- 6 To call that message "anti-intellectual" would be a comic under-statement. Since it's unlikely that he read the book, or knows anybody who would have a copy, Fred could not be said so much to hate it as to have despised the very thought of it. Any act of critical intelligence, any reasoned effort to see through the mask of power, enrages types like Fred. Such high-strung troops demand a god-like father-figure who will always reassure them that they needn't think, and so they snap into attack mode any time they sense a threat to such authority; and in this case, their fury is especially intense, because their idol is so small a man that even they can see that something's missing. Thus Fred cast that feeble speech of W's, which thrilled no-one, as if it had been one of Hitler's finest—a rafter-rattling diatribe that really put it to, or up, the assholes of the left.
- 7 Anyone who flips out at the thought of personal analysis is really asking for it himself. This, of course, is true not only of such big-time analyphobes as Nixon, Bush the Elder ("Please don't put me on the couch!") and George II (sworn enemy of "psychobabble"), but also of those brownshirt wannabes who pipe up from the cheapest seats, cursing out the critics in mad sympathy with their offended leader. Desublimated as they are, such venters tend to tell us more about themselves than any self-respecting person wants to know. With his fantasy about our Chief Executive's revenge upon the left-wing anus, for example, Fred reveals himself as much less interested in understanding Bush's programs than in bunking with him in a prison cell, where he could dance around and wave a

pom-pom every time the president turns out some underweight progressive first offender.

- 8 But let us turn away from Fred, despite the interest of his case, and just take note of certain basic features of the anti-intellectual (and anti-social) trend that he personifies. For example, there's the crucial fact that, by and large, such random jeers were not spontaneous eruptions of mass sentiment, but outbursts systematically provoked by a vast media-political complex that profited enormously, and profits still, by playing to the Fred in all of us. Take the above-quoted bit from "ERKTHE." That cyber-shot was fired at me within mere minutes of my brief slam-dance with Bill O'Reilly on the Fox News Channel, the two of us wrangling inconclusively (and, on his side, noisily) about his flagrant pro-Bush bias:

O'Reilly: With us now is the author of the book, Mark Crispin Miller, professor of media studies at New York University. And in the New York Times, Prof. Miller is quoted as saying, "One of the reasons I reproduce such long exchanges with journalists such as Chris Matthews and Bill O'Reilly is to show their unthinking complicity in putting President Bush across."

MCM: You find that to be an outrageous claim?

O'Reilly: Well, not outrageous. I just think you're misguided, as many, many academics are these days.

- 9 That last shot was, of course, the intended subtext of my whole exchange with Bill, who kept on pointedly addressing me, with faint mock-deference, as "Professor"—an epithet synonymous with "jackass" in minds of many in his audience. Indeed, the Fox News Channel has itself long been an enterprise that runs primarily on the bile of its half-educated viewers, as Roger Ailes, the outfit's crusty overseer, concedes: "There's a whole country that elitists will never acknowledge. What people deeply resent out there are those in the 'blue' states thinking they're smarter. There's a touch of that in our news." The same seething "touch" pervades every offering from the GOP's immense semi-official agitprop machine, from multi-millionaire Big Liars like Rush Limbaugh down to all the local yokels fulminating on the air from sea to shining sea.
- 10 Those hooked on such propaganda have been well-trained by its authors to scream into the nearest telephone, or pound out a threatening e-mail, at the slightest hint of what they might perceive as "liberal bias" by the corporate media. Thus had my image barely vanished from the screen when ERKTHE grabbed his laptop (these patriots are generally male) to accuse me of "Prevarication." However, while it owes much to top-down exhortation, that grass-roots ever-readiness to fling abuse has also been enabled hugely by e-mail—the postmodern version of old-fashioned hate mail, or rocks with scribbled warnings wrapped around them. Not long ago, such smart technologies were warmly hailed—by Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Ben Wattenberg, George Gilder, Mobil, Texas Instruments, et al.—for their democratizing influence in, say, Manila under Marcos, Moscow under Gorbachev, Beijing under Deng Xiao-Ping, the faxes/e-mails/ Internet sites eluding the dead hand of tyranny and helping keep the flame of Liberty alive, etc. While there's some truth to that heroic formulation, it tends to blind us to the anti-democratic uses of such speedy gadgets here on the domestic front. The likes of Fred and ERKTHE hit the keyboards not to broaden the debate but to abort it, taking their wild cyber-shots either to intimidate the heretics or to discourage others from paying attention. Thus, for example, do the goon squads frequently bombard the Amazon and Barnes & Noble sites with hostile fake reviews of books they obviously haven't read, to drive off as many folks as possible. "I have never read another book so full of bullshit." "More blather from the

communist left.” “Bigotry, Christophobia and left-wing swill. Save your money!” “Save your money and pass on this poorly written political drabble [sic].” “Anyone with an understanding of and respect for the free market system will see that this book is garbage.” Those on-line (and, often, one-line) attacks on Alan Dershowitz’s *Supreme Injustice*, Vincent Bugliosi’s *The Betrayal of American Democracy* and Barbara’s Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* exemplify the rightist tendency to use the most advanced communications hardware to shut down all discussion.

- 11 Such repressive tactics, we should note, are anti-intellectual in the deepest and most frightening sense—i.e., opposed to any rational attempt to jolt the public out of acquiescence. It is that livid quietism on the right, that militant and gleeful anti-rational animus, which marks this latest surge of anti-intellectualism—an attitude not necessarily the same as mere old-fashioned anti-academic feeling. Of course, the anti-intellectual attacks do often come in anti-academic garb—as in one Amazon “review” complaining of Bugliosi’s putative embrace by both “the media and leftist academics,” or in another that assails *The Bush Dyslexicon* for dissing “someone with a Harvard Business School degree who has solid common sense values and is not the least bit interested in the liberal academic establishment’s opinions.” Although they often coincide, however, it is the animus against the active mind itself that really drives such vigilatnes, and not a simple class-based beef against the snooty professoriate (the types that, as our president has put it, snack on “Brie and cheese”).
- 12 This much is clear from the incurable selective blindness of the anti-intellectuals, who can perceive the hated caste of academic privilege only insofar as it includes “the left.” Like ERKTHE, they simply cannot see that Bush too went to Yale and Harvard, any more than they can see how his agenda would not only poison but impoverish them (and, latterly, get them blown up in their own neighborhoods). At times the need to reinterpret Bush the drunken Eli as a dedicated populist has led to some absurd inventions. On Amazon, one troubled critic of my book asserted that “Bush was an excellent student at Yale, but many of his tests were graded down at his request to keep him as ‘one of the people.’” (“This is never acknowledged by Miller,” he observed correctly.) For the most part, however, the attackers don’t resort to fabrication, but are content fanatically to tune out any aspect of reality that contradicts their vision of “the liberal academic establishment.” In their eyes, Condoleezza Rice is not an arrogant and fuzzy-minded prof, nor is Paul Wolfowitz, despite their full commitment to the crackpot scheme of “national missile defense.” Likewise, for all the bloodshed and destruction caused by his simplistic notions, the anti-intellectuals would never think to damn the pompous Henry Kissinger as a “misguided” academic, any more than they would damn, in retrospect, the cohort of distinguished Ivy Leaguers who propelled us into Vietnam.
- 13 For reasons too complex for us to hazard here, the anti-intellectuals are finally on the side of power at its most unforgiving and voracious. And so they give a pass to those professors who are at the service of such power, while jeering anyone—inside or outside the Academy—who thinks to raise a fuss about how wrong it is. For them, this isn’t something to discuss, because discussion is itself suspicious, even dangerous—the sport of jerk-offs and Prevaricators. Thus there is no point in arguing with them—and yet no wisdom in attempting to ignore them. And such is true not only of the Bush regime’s most unrestrained supporters, but of the Bush regime itself—a fact that now requires a lot of careful thought, and something more.

- 14 And yet it's just such thinking that has all but disappeared since 9/11—as it always disappears in time of war. In bringing down the World Trade Center (a mile from where I sit right now) and ravaging the Pentagon, the terrorists not only murdered thousands, and left tens of thousands more bereft, and devastated lower Manhattan, and sparked the wreckage of the local and the national economy. Through that spectacular atrocity, the killers also managed, at one blow, to knock the brains clean out of countless good Americans. Although those citizens had started out that day with all their wits intact, by dinner-time they sounded way much like Fred—a terroristic consequence a lot less hideous, surely, than what happened in the air and on the ground, and yet even more destructive in the long run. For while we can and will no doubt rebuild beyond the shattered lives and property, the prospects aren't as upbeat for our frail democracy, which cannot function if too many people think like Bill O'Reilly and his fans.
- 15 The swift migration of (let's call it) Fred's position from the cyber-fringes into the great neo-liberal mainstream is apparent in all sorts of weird new attitudes among the educated. Where Bush's lifelong callowness and dimness had been obvious, and his incoherence a cause for endless easy ridicule, he is now reverently applauded for his eloquence ("Churchillian"), the rare "nimbleness" of his communications to the public, and, according to *The New York Times*, his "gravitas"—although his off-the-cuff remarks are just as adolescent, repetitious, empty and illogical as ever. (Go and read them if you don't believe me.) Where Bush/Cheney's rule was widely recognized, except among Republicans, as having been arranged not democratically but through grand theft and fraud, his presidency is now deemed a blessing to us all—and not just by his fellow partisans, but by the Democrats, who all but thank God for the placement of his foot on their collective neck. And where our prior wars had met with just and patriotic skepticism, the hard-won civic legacy of Vietnam, this latest, and in fact most perilous, of our Third World adventures meets with mere assent—edgy resignation if not frank applause—and, all too often, with a nasty allergy to all the rational and necessary questions: e.g., How will all this bombing keep us safe from further terrorist attacks? Won't it only make them even likelier? Why should merely cracking down on terrorism help to stop it, when that method hasn't worked in any other country? Why are we so hated in the Muslim world? What did our government do there to bring this horror home to all those innocent Americans? And why don't we learn anything, from our free press, about the gross ineptitude of our state agencies? about what's really happening in Afghanistan? about the pertinence of Central Asia's huge reserves of oil and natural gas? about the links between the Bush and the bin Laden families?
- 16 Ask such questions now, and, while you probably won't get the answers that you're looking for, you're likely to learn something quite important from the current climate—that terror serves to sabotage democracy, by making thought itself seem like a crime against the state. Ask those questions, and you will surely be accused of siding with the enemy—just the sort of answer that Al Qaeda's goons would also give you, if you asked them certain tactless questions. Outside of your armchair, then, there really is no place for intellectuals to hide, in this new world of terrorists both foreign and domestic, and fearful yahoos high and low.

RÉSUMÉS

Ce texte, qui sera publié dans la revue *Context* (n°9) et que Mark Crispin Miller et l'éditeur nous ont généreusement permis de reproduire, est un papier d'humeur qui tente de relier deux aspects de la culture américaine, à savoir d'un côté la liberté de la parole « démocratique » auquel le médium d'internet a donné une nouvelle dimension, et de l'autre l'anti-intellectualisme — vrai ou supposé — de cette même culture. En cela, il touche à un débat fondamental pour l'étude des Etats-Unis. Ce premier numéro de *Transatlantica*, du portrait de Tocqueville à la peinture américaine du XIXe siècle exposée à Giverny, lui fait une large place.

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