

系別：美國研究所

科目：英文寫作

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Dumb and Dumber: Are Americans Hostile to Knowledge?

By Patricia Cohen

A POPULAR VIDEO on YouTube shows Kellie Pickler, the adorable platinum blonde from "American Idol," appearing on the Fox game show "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" during celebrity week. Selected from a third-grade geography curriculum, the \$25,000 question asked: "Budapest is the capital of what European country?"

Ms. Pickler threw up both hands and looked at the large blackboard perplexed. "I thought Europe was a country," she said. Playing it safe, she chose to copy the answer offered by one of the genuine fifth graders: Hungary. "Hungry?" she said, eyes widening in disbelief. "That's a country? I've heard of Turkey. But Hungry? I've never heard of it."

Such, uh, lack of global awareness is the kind of thing that drives Susan Jacoby, author of "The Age of American Unreason," up a wall. Ms. Jacoby is one of a number of writers with new books that bemoan the state of American culture.

Joining the circle of curmudgeons this season is Eric G. Wilson, whose "Against Happiness" warns that the "American obsession with happiness" could "well lead to a sudden extinction of the creative impulse, that could result in an extermination as horrible as those foreshadowed by global warming and environmental crisis and nuclear proliferation."

Then there is Lee Siegel's "Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob," which inveighs against the Internet for encouraging solipsism, debased discourse and arrant commercialization. Mr. Siegel, one might remember, was suspended by The New Republic for using a fake online persona in order to trash critics of his blog ("you couldn't tie Siegel's shoelaces") and to praise himself ("brave, brilliant").

Ms. Jacoby, whose book came out on Tuesday, doesn't zero in on a particular technology or emotion, but rather on what she feels is a generalized hostility to knowledge. She is well aware that some may tag her a crank. "I expect to get bashed," said Ms. Jacoby, 62, either as an older person who upbraids the young for plummeting standards and values, or as a secularist whose defense of scientific rationalism is a way to disparage religion.

Ms. Jacoby, however, is quick to point out that her indictment is not limited by age or ideology. Yes, she knows that eggheads, nerds, bookworms, longhairs, pointy heads, highbrows and know-it-alls have been mocked and dismissed throughout American history. And liberal and conservative writers, from Richard Hofstadter to Allan Bloom, have regularly analyzed the phenomenon and offered advice.

T. J. Jackson Lears, a cultural historian who edits the quarterly review Raritan, said, "The tendency to this sort of lamentation is perennial in American history," adding that in periods "when political problems seem intractable or somehow frozen, there is a turn toward cultural issues."

But now, Ms. Jacoby said, something different is happening: anti-intellectualism (the attitude that "too much learning can be a dangerous thing") and anti-rationalism ("the idea that there is no such things as evidence or fact, just opinion") have fused in a particularly insidious way.

Not only are citizens ignorant about essential scientific, civic and cultural knowledge, she said, but they also don't think it matters.

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She pointed to a 2006 National Geographic poll that found nearly half of 18- to 24-year-olds don't think it is necessary or important to know where countries in the news are located. So more than three years into the Iraq war, only 23 percent of those with some college could locate Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel on a map.

Ms. Jacoby, dressed in a bright red turtleneck with lipstick to match, was sitting, appropriately, in that temple of knowledge, the New York Public Library's majestic Beaux Arts building on Fifth Avenue. The author of seven other books, she was a fellow at the library when she first got the idea for this book back in 2001, on 9/11.

Walking home to her Upper East Side apartment, she said, overwhelmed and confused, she stopped at a bar. As she sipped her bloody mary, she quietly listened to two men, neatly dressed in suits. For a second she thought they were going to compare that day's horrifying attack to the Japanese bombing in 1941 that blew America into World War II:

"This is just like Pearl Harbor," one of the men said.

The other asked, "What is Pearl Harbor?"

"That was when the Vietnamese dropped bombs in a harbor, and it started the Vietnam War," the first man replied.

At that moment, Ms. Jacoby said, "I decided to write this book."

Ms. Jacoby doesn't expect to revolutionize the nation's educational system or cause millions of Americans to switch off "American Idol" and pick up Schopenhauer. But she would like to start a conversation about why the United States seems particularly vulnerable to such a virulent strain of anti-intellectualism. After all, "the empire of infotainment doesn't stop at the American border," she said, yet students in many other countries consistently outperform American students in science, math and reading on comparative tests.

In part, she lays the blame on a failing educational system. "Although people are going to school more and more years, there's no evidence that they know more," she said.

Ms. Jacoby also blames religious fundamentalism's antipathy toward science, as she grieves over surveys that show that nearly two-thirds of Americans want creationism to be taught along with evolution.

Ms. Jacoby doesn't leave liberals out of her analysis, mentioning the New Left's attacks on universities in the 1960s, the decision to consign African-American and women's studies to an "academic ghetto" instead of integrating them into the core curriculum, ponderous musings on rock music and pop culture courses on everything from sitcoms to fat that trivialize college-level learning.

Avoiding the liberal or conservative label in this particular argument, she prefers to call herself a "cultural conservationist."

For all her scholarly interests, though, Ms. Jacoby said she recognized just how hard it is to tune out the 24/7 entertainment culture. A few years ago she participated in the annual campaign to turn off the television for a week. "I was stunned at how difficult it was for me," she said.

The surprise at her own dependency on electronic and visual media made her realize just how pervasive the culture of distraction is and how susceptible everyone is — even curmudgeons.

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~~X~~ allowing the use of a paper "pocket-size" dictionary onlyPart A: Reading Comprehension (60 pts total**)

Instructions: FIRST READ THE QUESTIONS BELOW. THEN CAREFULLY READ THE ARTICLE, "DUMB AND DUMBER: ARE AMERICANS HOSTILE TO KNOWLEDGE," BY PATRICIA COHEN. THERE ARE SIX/SEVEN QUESTIONS BASED ON THAT ARTICLE. USING GOOD ENGLISH, ANSWER ALL SIX QUESTIONS (AND SEVEN FOR EXTRA CREDIT, IF YOU SO DESIRE) FULLY AND COMPLETELY. WRITE CLEARLY, INTELLIGIBLY, AND WITH ATTENTION TO PROPER SPELLING.

1. Define and explain the term "dumb and dumber"—*and* what it implies. The article gives two concrete examples of this phenomenon. Describe one example. (10 pts)
2. Several writers were mentioned in the article. Give the name of the writer on whom the article is focused, the title of his/her book, the thrust of that book, and the catalyst (i.e., the defining urge) that prompted him/her to write the book. (10 pts)
3. According to this article, is the phenomenon of America getting "dumb and dumber" unique? Explain. (10 pts)
4. Explain how the writer (whom the article is about) poses, or describes, the "dumb and dumber" phenomenon facing America today. (10 pts)
5. The writer (whom the article is about) attributes this malady (i.e., problem) in part to the proclivities (i.e., leanings) of both the liberals and the conservatives in America. Describe and explain. (10 pts)
6. The story of the article points to two seemingly unrelated ironies. Describe and explain one of them. (10 pts)
7. What is The New Republic? Would you characterize it as liberal or conservative? (**Extra credit: 5 pts.)

Part B: Writing and Composition (40 pts total)

Instructions: THIS PART EXAMINES YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE AND DEVELOP SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS IN ENGLISH. IT IS AN EVALUATION OF YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE WITH MEANING AND PURPOSE AS WELL AS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE RULES AND STRUCTURE OF THE LANGUAGE. IN THIS PART, YOUR SCORE WILL BE DETERMINED BY (1) YOUR ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS (I.E., VOCABULARY AND THE USAGE OF WORDS, SPELLING, GRAMMAR INCLUDING PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALIZATION, AND LOGIC AND THE SEQUENCING OF YOUR IDEAS) AND (2) YOUR CONTENT AND SUBSTANCE (INCL. CLARITY AND PERSUASIVENESS).

"...Taiwan loves to imitate and copy things American." Do you agree or disagree? Using the above article as your reference along with your own thoughts, write a short essay (200-250 words, or about one typewritten page double-spaced) on your position regarding this statement. It is strongly advisable that you make a draft of your essay before turning it in. Ask for scratch paper if needed. Your essay counts 40 points.