

AN AMERICAN WEAKNESS

By

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An Abstract and a Warning

This is an essay about the deep reasons behind the poor response of the United States to the COVID-19 epidemic. The following quote (from the August 6, 2020 issue of the New York Times) summarizes the issue: “Nearly every country has struggled and made mistakes, but the U.S. is the only affluent nation to have suffered a severe, sustained outbreak for so long.” This quote leads to an article about the specific missteps of the response. I follow a different approach.

What is different between the U.S. and other affluent nations? In my view a major difference is that between the parliamentary system (of most affluent nations) and the American system of diffuse governance where individual legislators have far more power than individual members of a parliament. While the parliamentary system does not eliminate the influence of hidden special interests it makes it far more difficult for them. It costs a lot more money to “buy” a party than to “buy” a few politicians. As a result, much of the American public life, including education, is hampered by such influences.

I discuss the evidence for hidden interference in education and point out that there is no need for a conspiracy as long as agents have similar objectives.

I do not claim to have proved anything. I only provide suggestions that can be the start of a discussion.

1. What the Pandemic Has Revealed

I have come to the realization that the United States is not really what it claims to be, and the current pandemic just made that visible. (As opposed to the view that the bad outcomes have been the result of a recent decline, or the current political leadership.) Table 1 contains statistics for the effects of COVID-19 in the United States and five other countries taken at two dates, about a month apart [1]. While the statistics of COVID-19 are plagued by errors, conclusions drawn from large differences in the data are probably valid.

The virus has been far more contagious in the United States (number of cases per million population) than in the other countries listed but the mortality rate in the United States has been the second lowest among the countries listed. This suggest that medical care in the United States is quite good (better than in most other countries) but the American people are careless about their contacts. This should not come as a surprise given the controversy about masks. Organized resistance against mask wearing has been in the news almost every day. In one extreme case of irrational action, some parents in one western state objected to the school system’s requirement of masks for their children. In another case a sheriff forbade the use of masks in his force.

Another observation from the data of Table 1 is that the United States experienced a 40% increase in cases in a period of four weeks, the other listed countries experienced only a 5 to 10%. (The world increase is due to the

spreading of the virus to new countries, mainly in South America.) It seems that Americans do not learn from their mistakes. They keep ignoring science regardless of the evidence.

Country	Cases per million		Deaths per million		Mortality (Deaths/Cases)	
	7/19/2020	8/15/2020	7/19/2020	8/15/2020	7/19/2020	8/15/2020
USA	11,657	16,694	432	521	3.7%	3.1%
Italy	4,043	4,192	580	685	14.3%	16.3%
Germany	2,419	2,678	109	111	4.5%	4.1%
Finland	1,324	1,393	59	60	4.5%	4.3%
Greece	385	658	19	22	4.9%	3.4%
South Korea	268	299	6	6	2.2%	2.0%
World	1,865	2,772	78	98.6	4.2%	3.6%
Date of data	7/19/2020	8/15/2020	7/19/2020	8/15/2020	7/19/2020	8/15/2020

Such a contempt for science is not an isolated incident. The controversies about vaccination and climate change are also rooted in disregard for science and, to top it all, in a 2017 survey, about a quarter of 2,200 Americans surveyed believed that the sun orbits the earth [2].

The September 2020 issue of the *Atlantic* magazine contains a 23-page article “Anatomy of an American Failure” by Ed Yong that has been made available on the web already under the title “How the Pandemic Defeated America.” The article discusses the many issues that contributed to the failure, but it does not attempt to evaluate the importance of each one. The data of Table 1 suggest that the public attitude towards science might be the most important factor.

2. Why So Many Americans Do Not Trust Science

There are several factors at play. One is the long history of **anti-Intellectualism** in the United States. Distrust of intellectuals is rooted in the pioneer spirit of the early settlers when action was more important than ideas. American English may be the only language in the world that has a pejorative synonym, **egghead**, for intellectual.

Skepticism about new ideas is healthy but rejecting **all** intellectual output because some of it may be off its mark is not the right response. It is true that some ideas are nonsensical or worse, but there are also ideas that are enormously beneficial.

Let us think for a moment about radio. How were radio waves discovered? We need special devices for transmission and reception but why would anyone build them if they did not know that radio waves existed? The answer is that the existence of radio waves was predicted by the theoretical work of the physicist James Clark Maxwell around 1870. So abstract ideas can have enormous practical implications.

The factor most responsible for the disregard of science may be the **low quality of American education**. Indeed, American education is quite weak, and the few top Universities are the exception. The huge difference in the quality of education offered by the “top” colleges from the those at the “bottom” is primarily an American

phenomenon. While there may be differences amongst Western European Universities, they are minor, compared to those seen in the United States. The weakness of the educational system is acknowledged by the fact that Medicine and Law are postgraduate programs. I believe the U.S. the only advanced country where this is the case.

High schools are particularly weak with their emphasis on sports and socializing. The use of relative rather than absolute grading is another factor. When relative grading is used, good students are unpopular because they push up the curve. When absolute grading is used, good students tend to be popular because they may provide informal tutoring for their classmates. In a competitive environment "grading on the curve" may be fine. But it is detrimental in other situations. In many high schools a student can be "straight A" and still know too little. The problem is worsened because a teacher may cover only part of the curriculum. The net result is that only highly self-motivated students are truly educated.

These observations are consistent with published ranking of the educational systems. For example, according to *Insider* [3] the United States ranks 18th in reading performance in the 2015 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results. "Pew Research from 2017 found the US ranked 38th in math and 24th in science when compared against 71 other countries" (*ibid*). A *US News and World Report* 2020 survey [4] produced more favorable results for the United States with the following rankings (2019 rank in parentheses):

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|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Switzerland (1) | 5. Australia (7) | 8. Sweden (6) |
| 2. Canada (3) | 6. United Kingdom (5) | 9. Netherlands (11) |
| 3. Japan (2) | 7. United States (8) | 10. Norway (9). |
| 4. Germany (4) | | |

This study has been criticized [3] because its ranking is based on perception surveys that asked participants to judge how well-developed public education system of a country is, if they would consider attending university there and if the country provides top-quality education. Anyway, the 7th place ranking for the United States is nothing to brag about for a country that likes to be considered a World Leader. Our country fares much worse in an older survey where it ranked 52nd out of 139 nations in quality of educational instruction [2].

Another interesting piece of data is provided by the *Social Progress Index* discussed in a New York Times Opinion Column by Nicholas Kristof [5]. The United States ranks No. 1 in the world in quality of universities, but No. 91 in access to quality basic education.

The United States spends more per student than any other country in the world [4] so the weakness of the educational system is not the result of the lack of funds but of how such funds are spent. A full history of the evolution of the educational system and attempts to reform it is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead I will focus on the reaction to the most recent major reform attempt, the **Common Core Initiative** (full name: Common Core State Standards Initiative). It was launched in 2010 to ensure (among other things) that "students graduating from high school are prepared to enter credit-bearing courses at two- or four-year college programs or to enter the workforce" [6]. The initiative has been the subject of considerable criticism because it emphasizes mathematics and science at the expense of humanities (as well as other reasons). Such criticism has come from politically conservative think tanks (such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute), from

Catholic educators, and both right- and left-wing commentators. One of the latter claimed that the project is “a huge profit-making enterprise” and that it “pushes out the things kids love about school, like art and music” [*ibid*]. In New York State some parents claim “that the new assessments are too difficult and are causing too much stress, leading to an ‘opt-out movement’ in which parents refuse to let their children take the tests” [*ibid*].

While there are problems with the Common Core that should be addressed, its basic premise is sound: mathematics and science are far more important in the 21st century than they were, say, 100 years ago. It is pretty obvious that if we are going to increase the time students spend studying these subjects, something else has to go. Are the opponents of emphasizing mathematics and science at the expense of humanities detached from reality? There is another, quite sinister, explanation that I will discuss in the context of “class struggle.”

3. A Digression on “Class Struggle”

Usually, “class struggle” is thought of as a struggle between the rich and the poor. But there is another model that I find far more realistic. In his famous work 1984 **George Orwell** has included a book within a book called “The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism by Emmanuel Goldstein.” Chapter 1 of that work is titled “Ignorance is Strength” and there it is observed that “there (always) have been three kinds of people in the world, the *High*, the *Middle*, and the *Low*.” Orwell goes on to say that revolutions are not the actions of the *Low* against the *High* but those of the *Middle* against the *High*. Both groups try to obtain the alliance of the multitude of the *Low*. If the *Middle* succeeds in obtaining the alliance of the *Low*, a successful revolution occurs. On the other hand, the *High* can forestall revolutions by turning the *Low* against the *Middle*.

In the sequel I am going to use different terms for two of the categories. *Ordinary* rather than *Low* because *Low* has a pejorative connotation. And *Skilled* rather than *Middle* to avoid confusion with Middle Class.

In the medieval societies the *High* were the nobles who were also the big landowners. The *Skilled* consisted of merchants and entrepreneurs, elite troops, and, generally, people with skills. The rest of the population were *Ordinary*. The *High* tried as much as possible to have the people of the *Skilled* from outside the country or marked in some way as outsiders. The Swiss Guards of the Pope is one surviving example of the once widespread practice of using foreigners as imperial bodyguards. Allowing education only for monks and nuns (who could not have legitimate children) had a similar motivation.

The most difficult *Skilled* group to control is that of the merchants and entrepreneurs. One “solution” is to have the merchants and entrepreneurs (entirely or mostly) members of a distinct (minority) population. Such a composition can be assured by discouraging members of the majority population from acquiring an education or engaging in certain activities and leave those activities open only to a minority group. In Europe, the most significant such *Skilled* group has been the Jews, but in the Ottoman Empire (that ruled most of the Middle East for over 500 years) it also included Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Christian Copts (in Egypt). **Bernard Lewis** provides examples of the results of such a policy in his book *The Middle East* [7]. He mentions a list of 40 private bankers in Istanbul in 1912. It included 12 Greeks, 12 Armenians, 8 Jews, and 5 *Levantine*s, people of Western European origin. A similar list of 34 stockbrokers included 18 Greeks, 6 Jews, 5 Armenians but no Turks.

Because the Ottoman Empire survived until 1922, we have detailed knowledge of how the majority of the population was kept in the dark. Education was the responsibility of religious authorities and in the early grades Muslim children were taught to memorize the Quran rather than to read or write. As a result, most Muslims were illiterate. Jews, Greeks, and Armenians were educated properly and filled the needs for skilled people. But as religious minorities, they did not pose a threat to the regime. To make sure that most Muslims were uninformed, the printing press was banned in 1485 with the excuse that printing of Arabic characters was sacrilegious. However, a Jewish press was approved about 20 years later, on the condition it prints only texts in the Hebrew alphabet. An Armenian press was approved in 1567 and a Greek one in 1627, each limited to the respective alphabets. It was only in 1727, almost 300 years after the invention of the printing press, that printing in Turkish with Arabic characters was allowed.

The book *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* [8] by **Thomas Sowell** contains a long chapter titled *Are Jews Generic?* Sowell observes that “Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Ibos in Nigeria, Marwaris in Burma, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and Lebanese in a number of countries” had similar “economic and social roles” as the Jews in Europe. He has coined the term “Middleman Minorities” for such groups but he does not discuss the reasons for their existence. He attributes their success to their work ethic, but he does not say why the majority lacks such an ethic. Of course, an alternative explanation is that the majority was not allowed or discouraged from acquiring the needed skills for the professions practiced by the minorities.

In the United States the *High* consists of the very wealthy people who influence politicians through their campaign contributions and other donations. A lot has been written about the “top 1%” but that group is much bigger than the *High*. According to [9] the top 1% consists of families with take home income over \$400,000 and the top 0.01% of those with take home income over \$10,000,000 (about 16,000 families). The *High* is best identified with the top 0.01%.

In most developed countries, as well as in the United States, the *Skilled* consists of affluent people with high skills that are essential for the society such as high-ranking civil and military officials, professionals (physicians, engineers, lawyers, etc.), merchants, and entrepreneurs. In the United States the annual income of most such people would place them in the top 5% (income above \$150,000) but not in the top 0.1% (income above a million and a half). The rest of the population is *Ordinary*.

Here is another way to see why it is wrong to focus in the top 1% rather the top 0.01%. Consider three individuals:

Tony (annual income \$60,000, close to the US median),
David (annual income \$500,000, a bit over the 1% threshold), and
Nelson (annual income \$11,000,000, a bit over the top 0.01% threshold).

David earns \$440,000 more than *Tony*. But *David* earns \$10,500,000 less than *Nelson*. So, the income gap between *Nelson* and *David* is more than 20 times the income gap between *David* and *Tony*. It seems logical that *David's* interests should be closer to those of *Tony* than to those of *Nelson*. You can also think of the travel modes of these three: when *Tony* travels, they fly coach, *David* flies first class, and *Nelson* in their own private plane. Again, *David's* experience is much closer to that of *Tony* than to that of *Nelson*.

Unfortunately, for *David*, there is a downside to their proximity to *Tony*. *Tony* may not be aware of *Nelson's* existence and it is unlikely they will ever meet. But *Tony* is well aware of *David*. For example, *David* may be their family doctor. The end result is that any resentment *Tony* has against the “rich,” it is going to be expressed against people like *David*. The *Ordinary* may resent the *Skilled* (the top 1%) because they are people they know.

We should keep in mind that other factors besides income determine who is in each one of the three groups. For example, some members of the *Skilled* may be quite wealthy or powerful but because of their religion they are not part of the *High*. Examples include the much maligned “Jewish Bankers” and the “Tax Producers” of the Ottoman Empire. A Tax Producer was responsible for imposing and collecting taxes in a province and, after taking his cut, send the funds to the emperor (the sultan). This was an enormously powerful position and it was “handicapped” by giving it only to non-Muslims. (I have some direct knowledge on the subject: the father of my maternal grandmother held such a position and so did his brother and their father.)

4. Explanations for the Educational Weakness

It seems that the state of the American educational system is compatible with the following explanation. There are entities in the *High* (although not everyone in the *High* may share their views) that want a poorly educated populace because it is hard to control educated people. The needs for highly educated labor are filled by the few self-motivated individuals and by immigrants. When there is lack of specialists in a field, the United States is known to aggressively recruit such specialists from other countries.

I am an immigrant myself and about two thirds of the faculty of the department of Computer Science at Stony Brook University (my institution) are immigrants (not an unusual case among American Universities). On several occasions one of my immigrant colleagues would complain about the poor quality of high schools that their children attended in the United States. I would reply “why do you think you and I have such good jobs here?”

Because, by definition, the *Skilled* consists of the most educated segment of a society they are on the average more enlightened and less prejudiced than the population of a country as a whole and, as a result, more likely to support social change. However, having immigrants as a significant part of the *Skilled* is a brilliant strategy for minimal social change because immigrants are busy establishing and proving themselves.

In the Ottoman Empire minimal education for the majority was official government policy but in the United States those responsible for the poor state of our Educational System are well hidden. Their goal is an uneducated public that can be manipulated to vote for the interests of the manipulator rather than their own. They can influence the government directly by campaign contributions. By investing in the news media and community organizations they can directly influence the public opinion as well. By funding “think tanks” and providing University endowments they are influencing academia. They may channel funds through foundations to support “grass-root” organizations that can advance their goals. I do not think there is any organized conspiracy, but there is an alignment of objectives that achieves the same effect.

While I have no direct evidence about the existence of such factors, several puzzling situations in the United States could be explained easily if such factors existed.

It is likely that most, if not all, of the interference has been in opposing reforms that attempt to fix a broken system. While the opponents of such reforms may phrase their arguments in scholarly terms, it is likely that they are encouraged by those wishing to keep a broken system in place. It is also possible that in each case the opponents of reform from the *High* are joined by others, as it is clearly the case with the opposition to the Common Core. After all, the far-left is as anti-intellectual as the far-right.

Can anything be done to curtail the influence of the hidden factors?

The visible government of the United States is rather weak in comparison to that of other Western democracies. In the parliamentary system that is common in Western Europe (and elsewhere) the leader of the party (or coalition of parties) that controls the legislature is the prime minister, head of the executive branch. In the United States we often have a situation where at least one of the legislative bodies (House or Senate) is controlled by a different party than the president's so that little is accomplished.

The American system results in great variations in political viewpoints within each party that is possible because legislators are nominated in local elections and do not have to follow a "party line." They also need to raise funds for their political campaigns. This leaves the door open for special interests of all kinds.

Ironically, the "reforms" of the late 1960's and 1970's that placed more emphasis on "open" primaries, thereby weakening a party's control over its candidates for office, made the situation worse. An apt analogy is opening a window in your house. You get fresh air but also flies and mosquitos. Is it a coincidence that income inequality has been increasing since 1980? [10]

5. Conclusions

Clearly, there is a need for educational reform. That in turn requires improving the quality and status of teachers. Finland is a country that has carried such a reform successfully and it can serve as an example.

However, the most important (and hardest to implement) reform is that of our political system. The current system gives disproportional power to small parts of the electorate ("key states"), which in turn makes it easier for the *Highs* to pursue their goals. A move to a unicameral parliamentary system is too drastic a step to even contemplate. But the abolition of the electoral college and its replacement by the direct election of the president that is discussed in the news media (for example [11]) will be a step in the right direction.

The reversal of the 1970's reforms that took away power from party leaders and increased the importance of the primary elections is another modest step. While these reforms were supposed to give more power to "the people," in reality they gave more power to the hidden influencers and they also caused polarization.

I realize that such drastic reforms are not going to happen any time soon but until they happen the United States will be lagging behind other Western Democracies.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the following people for their extensive and frank comments on an earlier draft of this article: Rabbi Adam Fisher, Ken Steiglitz, Eugene Joseph, Michael Kifer, and Jothi Curcio. Of course, their help does not mean that they agree with my positions because I did not make all the changes they suggested.

Notes

- [1] Data taken from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.
- [2] Wikipedia* article on Anti-Intellectualism <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-intellectualism>.
- [3] Mack DeGeurin “The US spends more on education than any other country, but students lag behind academically. Here's how much other countries spend and how well their students perform.” *Insider* August 2019. <https://www.insider.com/how-much-countries-around-the-world-spend-on-education-2019-8>
- [4] <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/best-education>
- [5] Nicholas Kristof “We’re No. 28! And Dropping!” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/opinion/united-states-social-progress.html>
- [6] Wikipedia* article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Core_State_Standards_Initiative
- [7] Bernard Lewis *The Middle East, A brief History of the last 2000 years*, Touchtone, 1995.
- [8] Thomas Sowell *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, Encounter Books, 2005.
- [9] For the specific numbers I rely on the following post:
G. E. Miller “The Top 1% and Income Inequality in the U.S.” January 2019, <https://20somethingfinance.com/the-top-1-percent-and-income-inequality-united-states/>
- [10] The Gini Index is a measure of income inequality and, for the United States, it went from 34.6 in 1979 to 37.5 in 1986 and to 41.5 in 2016. Source: <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>
- [11] Jesse Wegman “The Electoral College Will Destroy America” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/opinion/electoral-college-trump-biden.html?ref=oembed>

* I always check the accuracy of Wikipedia articles from sources that I trust.