The State of the American Mind
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Foreword

AMERICA: HAVE WE LOST OUR MIND?

Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow

When The Closing of the American Mind was published in 1987, even as it soared to phenomenal success, Allan Bloom may have suspected that the national object named in the title was doubly endangered. Not only was the American Mind slipping into darkness. The thing itself was already a dubious notion, at least in elite cultural and education zones. The book chronicled the deterioration of learning and mores in the institution responsible for them, the college campus, and the assumption of an “American Mind” didn’t fit the times. It sounded too intellectual, too comprehensive and singular, and its patriotic undertone crossed the post-Vietnam cynicism of the professorate.

And so the book struck liberals as an out-of-touch denunciation of contemporary life. In truth, by charting a version of the American mentality it joined a long and illustrious lineage of commentary on the topic. Tocqueville’s chapter “The Philosophical Method of the Americans,” Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” and Whitman’s 1855 “Preface” to Leaves of Grass; V. L. Parrington’s Main Currents of American Thought (1927); and the Cold War-era symposia “Our Country and Our Culture” (Partisan Review) and “The National Purpose” (Life Magazine), to name a few famous cases—each outlined a characteristic American intelligence. They singled out an “American psychology,” “Man thinking,” a Cartesian “disposition of mind,” and “the genius of the United States,” each one a representative outlook of the American Experiment. During the Reagan era,
such sweeping conceptions still retained some authority in public life.

“The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions.” So said J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur in *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782), announcing the first condition of the American Mind, the need to think anew. The Old World order of birth, court, and established church didn’t apply across the ocean, not in a nation that from the start marked itself an exception in the flow of human history. Tocqueville condensed the American way into a personal standpoint: “to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better; to see the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone.” Emerson called it “self-reliance” and instructed his countrymen, “Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”

If the American attends a church or joins a party, it’s because he has deemed it worthy, not because someone told him so. Conformity disgusts him, and so does dependency. Ben Franklin set the model of success. He starts out a runaway, broke and forlorn in Philadelphia, but a strong work ethic, diligent reading, and canny business moves bring him wealth and renown. When in the opening of the *Autobiography* he offered his life as a design “fit to be imitated,” he became for later generations the “self-made man” prototype. The American cherishes equality, to be sure, but only as a level playing field (the free pursuit of happiness), not a leveling of outcomes, which can only happen when a higher American ideal, liberty, is curtailed. Yes, America failed that ideal with slavery and Jim Crow, but the two most influential civil rights figures in our history, Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King Jr., didn’t critique the ideal of liberty. They demanded that African Americans share in it.

These traits form the American posture—independent thought and action, thrift and industriousness, delayed gratification and equal opportunity. The American Mind possesses specific knowledge, too, not just an attitude. You must remember the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Bible (as our contribu-
tor Daniel Dreisbach proves), along with stories of the first colo
nists, the Founding, and the pioneer experience. Religious liberty,
grounded in the case of the Pilgrims, must be recognized as central
to civic affairs, and economic liberty as well, the freedom to make
contracts and act entrepreneurially. Another root concept is popular
sovereignty, which deserves all the solemnity imparted in the assertion “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall
not perish from the earth.” The American appreciates the divided
structure of government and insists on local control, fearing the con-
sequences of overcentralization and distant masters. However much
he despises journalists, he protects a free press and relies on it to
monitor elections and politicians. And while the American Mind
prizes individualism, it also hails selfless civic virtue, best embodied
by our Cincinnatus, George Washington, who stood for the common
good and transcended politics.

These are the ingredients of the American Mind and character,
but as Bloom detailed all too well, the dismantling of it was nearly
complete by the mid-1980s. The characteristic knowledge and dis-
positions had collapsed. In Bloom’s Enlightenment-leaning version,
the American Mind exercised critical intellectual habits; it was cos-
mopolitan and broad-ranging, steeped in the past and committed
to learning for its own sake. The purpose of the university was to
draw youths into that formation through systematic immersion in
a syllabus of great books, art, and ideas, but in the 1980s, barbarism
had seized the day. Multiculturalism was busy eliminating require-
ments in Western civilization and inserting third-rate exertions in
identity politics. Student-centered pedagogies turned the learning
process upside down, disrupting the transmission of wisdom from
one generation to the next. Undergraduates had more freedom than
ever, and they wasted it in cheap delights.

People responded to Bloom’s argument because it seemed to apply
to the entire country, not just higher education. The breakdown of
the curriculum reflected the breakdown of our civics and culture,
they believed, and they were right, as far as a coherent and recog-
nized American identity was concerned. In fact, the premise that the
ideal American Mind had collapsed may have been the one point on which left-wing and right-wing readers of Closing agreed. They differed in that one group praised the development, the other mourned it.

That may have been the secret of its success. Bloom’s study entered American society in the final gasp of American identity. By 1985, people had pretty much stopped talking in terms of a common, unitary American anything. It wasn’t only that the American Mind had slipped into ignorance and hedonism. It was that recourse to any essential and proper feature of American individuals now came off as empty, and in some settings suspect. The cause was simple. If you assume an umbrella American condition, the argument went, you reduce the varieties of American identity and experience to one preferred form. Once you envision the American Mind, the “national character,” the American Dream, or any other overarching national entity or norm, you marginalize the many peoples who don’t fall under it. It comes off as selective and exclusionary, and culpable, too. When our first contributor in this volume, E. D. Hirsch, in the same year of 1987 famously compiled a “core knowledge” that every American must know, he was denounced as Eurocentric and monocultural, committed to white, male, bourgeois dominance. Hirsch believed that mastering the “cultural literacy” list was necessary to social mobility, and he offered scientific studies as proof. Indeed, he argued, keeping cultural literacy from disadvantaged groups only perpetuated their disadvantage. But his progressive aims didn’t matter. Most intellectuals and academics looked at the content of his inventory and quickly judged it insufficiently diverse.

This emphasis on group differences framed standard American traits and destinies as a political ploy, a way of favoring one group under the spurious banner of an ideal, historically sanctioned role model. The logical remedy was to draw other populations into the ongoing affirmation and revision of the American Mind, American exceptionalism, and other defining national conditions. But reformers took a shorter course. Instead of ensuring that certain groups previously shut out of American identity be received within it, they dis-
credited the ideal itself. Difference had to be respected, and the only way to do so was to deny any synthesis and displace the traditional inheritance. Why should a black sophomore study the Mayflower Compact and *Walden* in high school, instead of something out of her own culture? For decades, U.S. politicians, artists, and thinkers had read them as cardinal expressions of the American outlook, accepting them as part of an American formation. But it was high time to acknowledge her, too, not just white New England men from long ago. That was the positive intent, and to realize it in practice, the educators had to negate the seminal American heritage. We cherished the *pluribus* and abandoned the *unum*. The American Mind was one of the casualties.

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This minioutline of a core American identity crumbling into group difference is, no doubt, familiar to readers, and we don’t mean to rehearse the causes or judge its rightness once more. That’s not what this volume is about. We accept the fact that we have lost the capacity and confidence to conceive and articulate America in essential, universal terms. Or rather, we know that essentialist definitions of American identity have no traction in educational and intellectual spheres. There, the old myths of the American Adam, Manifest Destiny, Melting Pot, and American Dream are worse than stale. They are pernicious. The sweeping mandates of diversity, multiculturalism, and cultural relativism disallow them.

We may ask, however, now that we are four decades into the diversity movement, about the condition of the dispositions and knowledge that made up the American Mind for most of our history. Certain myths may have been denounced, but not First Amendment freedoms, the Franklin work ethic, Washingtonian civic virtue, general historical knowledge, and vigorous civic engagement. The process of social differentiation wasn’t supposed to reject those virtues and principles, only open them up to others, drawing more Americans into the body politic. Even as it raised the bar of equality, diversity meant no disrespect to individual liberties, so people
said. Excluded and marginalized groups would become proud and patriotic, not clamorous and adversarial. Knowledge of U.S. history, literature, and the arts was to increase among them, civic participation to widen and deepen. A syllabus in English class containing more women and minority authors would inspire students to higher achievement. More women and minorities in positions of power in business and politics would assure those groups that the American Dream was theirs to pursue. Diversity itself would make workplaces more vibrant and less insular.

That was the promise of breaking up the old consensus. But when we survey the thoughts and habits of the American people today, we find the antithesis of the traditional American Mind and national character emerging again and again. One of us works in book publishing and literary culture, one in magazine publishing and higher education, and we’ve watched closely and sometimes participated in cultural controversies from the Canon Wars to *The Bell Curve* to liberal bias in media and on campus. Here is what we have observed:

Instead of acquiring a richer and fuller knowledge of U.S. history and civics, American students and grown-ups display astounding ignorance of them, and their blindness is matched by their indifference to the problem.

Civic virtue is a fading trait, our political sphere now typically understood as merely a contest of group interests. Patriotism and the common good are quaint notions.

Individualism has evolved from “rugged” versions of the past into present modes of self-absorption.

Not only has self-reliance become a spurious boast (“You didn’t build that”), but dependency itself has become a tactical claim.

Instead of upholding basic liberties, more and more Americans accept restrictions on speech, freedom of association, rights to privacy, and religious conscience.

We aren’t the only ones who have noticed an American Mind in decline. Many intellectuals and social thinkers from across the ideological spectrum express a conviction that something has gone awry in the intellectual powers of American citizens. They don’t iden-
tify the same exact failing, but they agree in connecting diverse failings in our society to the way people’s minds work—or don’t work. Books and essays detail mental behaviors, biases of assorted kinds, “blinks” and “nudges,” rational and irrational choices, narcissism and cluelessness, explaining how and where they go wrong. As we write these words, a political uproar is under way over comments by one of the architects of the Affordable Care Act, MIT professor Jonathan Gruber, who tied the act’s design and passage to the “stupidity” of the American people. As commentaries flash daily in the media and politicians take sides, we wonder if the outrage lies not in the insult but in the suspicion of its truth. Perhaps the leading opinion maker on television in the last ten years, Jon Stewart, gears laugh lines to episodes of ignorance and myopia. He implies, repeatedly, it’s the mental problem that matters most, not the politics.

When Barack Obama describes a large portion of the U.S. population as “bitter, [clinging] to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations,” as he did in Pennsylvania while campaigning in 2008, it sounds as if they need therapy, not better political leadership. Susan Jacoby’s The Age of American Unreason, which warned that anti-intellectualism in America had become “a morbid disease affecting the entire body politic” (10), was the biggest nonfiction best seller of 2008. Another 2008 publication, Nicholas Carr’s widely circulated Atlantic Monthly essay, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” maintained that the Internet has steered our brains into speedy and shallow consciousness. One of the most prominent ideas in psychology today is Jonathan Haidt’s theory that “groupish righteousness” in America is hardening biases of all kinds. One of the surest signs of this mentality emphasis is the frequent translation of earnest expression into phobic conditions, as in homophobia, Islamophobia, technophobia. . . .

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These judgments, along with our own observations, have led us to conceive this volume of essays. It is an empirical approach to the
problem. Except for the final entries, which are frankly general and
prognostic, we downplay culture wars sallies and skirt Grand The-
ses. The editors’ motivation may be a large speculative one—that
is, to ponder the consequences of the fracturing of the American
Mind—but the entries, for the most part, stick to narrow spheres and
limited conclusions. We wanted it that way.

The contributors are leading voices in professional and public
spheres with long experience studying American culture and soci-
ety. Each one has selected an area of concern and collected numeri-
cal data, personal observations, and other concrete evidence of pre-
dominant attitudes and behaviors into a summary description. The
areas range from the cognitive workings of an individual mind to
rates of disability claims under Social Security, from composition
exercises to personality tests, Madison on religious liberty to Freud
on civil society. Following E. D. Hirsch’s introduction, which maps
out why widespread cultural knowledge is so important to a thriving
republic, we have organized the areas into three sections:

■ “States of Mind: Indicators of Intellectual and Cognitive
Decline”—These essays broach specific mental deficiencies
among the population, including lagging cultural IQ, low bib-
lical literacy, poor writing skills, a low-performing higher-ed
system, and overmedication.
■ “Personal and Cognitive Habits/Interests”—These essays
turn to specific mental behaviors and interests, including
avoiding the news, impatient perception, narcissism, and
conspiracy obsessions.
■ “National Consequences”—These essays examine broader
trends affecting populations and institutions, including rates
of entitlement claims, voting habits, the culture of criticism,
and higher education.

The methods vary. Some essays rest on historical facts, such as
Daniel Dreisbach’s review of the status of biblical literacy in Amer-
ica during the years of the Founding (on which he bases the civic
impact of biblical illiteracy today). Others pursue statistical paths,
such as Nicholas Eberstadt’s compilation of data on entitlements and federal spending, which shows how vast conditions fostering the entitlement mentality have become. Still others rely on personal acquaintance—for instance, Steve Wasserman’s critique of book reviewing in America, which draws upon his tenure as books editor at the Los Angeles Times. The settings they choose in which to display the twenty-first-century American Mind in operation include college campuses, art museums, voting booths, Facebook pages, pediatricians’ offices, and blog pages.

Taken together, the essays offer a profile of the American Mind in disarray. The profile is not a partial one. The contributors provide enough population data and expert testimony for us to draw this unfortunate inference with confidence. There is no gainsaying the evidence in Greg Lukianoff’s summary of “disinvitation season” that proves a chill has settled upon higher education, and that a presumption of freedom-from-offense enforces it. When readers encounter data on medical prescriptions compiled by Robert Whitaker, which show that one in five Americans took a psychiatric drug in 2010, they have no cause to quibble. Instead, they will take a crowded subway home and reflect upon the startling probability that more than a dozen passengers nearby have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. And we imagine that David Mindich’s portrait of the tuned-out twenty-year-old won’t convince high school and college teachers of anything. No, it will corroborate what they see every day.

We assume, too, that the trends detailed in the essays will please no one. With college tuition rates at current levels, the lack of learning that usually takes place from freshman year to graduation is deplorable [see Richard Arum]. And for those who know the history of voting rights in America, the fact that barely one-third of eligible citizens showed up for the 2014 midterm election, the lowest rate since World War II, is a sign of profound disengagement [see Ilya Somin].

Needless to say, such trends are antithetical to the American Mind and character in its traditional expression. The narcissistic youths in Jean Twenge’s descriptions could hardly lie farther from
representative figures of the past such as Frederick Douglass risking death and standing up to sadistic Mr. Covey, Thoreau heading off to the woods on the Fourth of July to build a hut and plant beans, Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage* running scared in one battle but standing firm in the next, and Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* forging a successful farm out of the bleak Nebraska hills. We have become so accustomed to emotive displays in public life and popular media that when Dennis Prager identifies our moment as the Age of Feelings, we receive it as the obvious truth. But it wasn’t so many years ago that what we take as customary would have struck ordinary Americans (whose role models might have included strong, silent types such as the marshal in *High Noon* and composed ladies such as Jackie Onassis) as bizarre and outrageous. If the local newspaper and public library are fundamental institutions of a free republic, as Franklin believed, then Americans who never read one or visit the other shirk the responsibilities laid upon them by the Founders. What would John Winthrop, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and W. E. B. Du Bois think of the entitlement mentality fostered once we lost the distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor?

Raising such comparisons makes many people uneasy, of course. To some it smacks of blaming the victim, and it certainly crosses the nonjudgmentalism that R. R. Reno singles out as the first premise of contemporary affairs. But we do ourselves and our nation no favors when we ignore evidence of debility and withhold criticism. When people fall short of the ideals of their country, they have to be told. The American Mind was an extraordinary creation, and it has to be remembered. Its expressions still ring with magic: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos”; “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”; “I have a dream. . . .”

The current expressions of the American Mind, compiled and expounded in the following pages, don’t ring at all. They aren’t extreme or provocative; they are banal and uninspiring. Two hundred and thirty years ago, Crevecoeur could look out over the most homely American setting and testify to a historic flourishing of
human beings: “Every thing has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants.” We survey the American scene in 2015 and record unprecedented wealth, an overflow of goods that but two generations ago would have struck people as fantastical luxuries. The digital revolution continues apace, and more youths than ever before go to college and aspire to graduate school. Media have never been so profuse and diverse, while government has never provided so many people and organizations assistance and safety.

All the ingredients are in place, one would think, for the American Mind to prosper. Let us see how and where and why it does not.
Introduction

The Knowledge Requirement

WHAT EVERY AMERICAN NEEDS TO KNOW

E. D. Hirsch Jr.

Given all the discussion and fret about student achievement in the United States today, it is easy to forget that the last thirty years of public secondary education are a record not of decline but of flat performance. Overall, test scores for high school students in math, reading, and other subjects haven’t much changed. Scores have fallen, yes, but it happened in the preceding two decades, from 1962 to 1979, when verbal results on the SAT slid precipitously, as shown in the figure below. I include data in the same years for combined results on the Iowa Test of Educational Development that nearly all high school juniors and seniors in the state of Iowa had to take.

The Iowa scores are important because they dispel a common
explanation for the SAT trend—that is, the belief that scores went down because more students took the exam, not because student learning had declined. Because virtually every student in Iowa sat for the test, the data undermine the excuse that democratization of the SAT caused the drop; Iowa didn’t suddenly become significantly more diverse during these decades.

Other circumstances, too, provide evidence against the blame-demographics-not-the-schools theme, most importantly, the fact that the greatest expansion of SAT test takers—from 5 percent to 50 percent of seniors—occurred between 1952 and 1963, before the great decline set in. If demographics actually did create the sliding scores, then the 1952–1963 period should have produced the steepest fall in the national average. In fact, as the SAT pool contained more youths of different class, race, and ethnicity, the scores did not fall. In the following years, from 1962 to 1979 when scores did plummet, the diversity of test takers remained fairly stable.

The shortcomings of the demographic explanation led me long ago to search for other explanations for educational decline. My conclusion was a historical one: that certain ideas began to dominate teacher-training institutions in the 1930s, most prominently the idea that general knowledge was not central to an individual’s education. Instead of acquiring broad awareness of the basics of science, history, civics, religion, literature, and the arts, the education schools maintained, students should “learn how to learn,” to develop abstract thinking skills that they could apply fruitfully to various facts, events, and conditions as they came up in people’s lives. They didn’t need to study the details of the Civil War; they needed to develop critical-thinking and problem-solving habits that they could wield when the Civil War and anything else came along. After World War II, as older teachers who emphasized content knowledge retired and young ones indoctrinated in the skills-oriented approach began teaching, these ideas drifted steadily into classrooms and textbooks. Even though the ideas were not proved scientifically, they took charge of the curriculum and still shape it today. The fate of my counteridea that background knowledge (“mere facts”) is essen-
tial to educational performance, that abstract skills falter without a foundation of content supporting them, is a lesson in what needs to be done to produce more competent Americans.

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When my book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* came out more than twenty-five years ago and stayed on the best seller list for six months, the initial enthusiasm from the general public was followed by a torrent of abuse from the academy. The public said, “We need this. At last, somebody has outlined the shared knowledge that educated people in the United States possess, and that the schools should teach.” Readers understood that an engaged citizenry needed to be an informed one, too, if the people were to exercise their rights and privileges responsibly and wisely. They recognized as well that rising on the income ladder usually requires academic success, and the more general knowledge a student brings to class, the better the prospects.

Given the stunning popularity of *Cultural Literacy*, one would have expected at least some portions of our education system to have followed with a coherent curriculum designed to impart that knowledge, just as Thomas Jefferson envisioned common schools doing for everyone two hundred years ago. It didn’t happen. From the academy, people in education departments judged *Cultural Literacy* as a retrograde return to the regurgitation of mere facts, while humanities professors felt indignant that anyone should try to perpetuate the existing culture at a time when the most important business of education was to change and improve American culture.

The year of publication, 1987, was at the height of the effort to make the dominant culture less male, white, and culturally middle-class. *Ms.* was to replace *Miss* and *Mrs.*, and the pronoun *anyone* was to be followed by *her* as well as by *his*. Such matters of style were part of a political effort to raise the power and status of women, minorities, and other out-groups. The great Swedish education researcher Torsten Husén observed that the push for equality in all aspects of education and cultural life after World War II was not
just an American but a Western, international phenomenon. Getting caught up in all of it was dizzying and exhilarating.

But it was also depressing, because although my political sentiments fell on the left with the levelers, my research made it evident that those who attacked Cultural Literacy in the name of greater equality deeply missed the point. In the name of destroying cultural hegemony, the academy was preventing K–12 education from delivering the knowledge that Americans need to fulfill their democratic citizenship and that disadvantaged students need to close the achievement gap and climb the class ladder. Academic critics were so angry at the very idea of cultural literacy—that is, of a body of knowledge common to informed individuals, made use of continually in their criticisms—that they did not even try to follow the scientific evidence showing how essential that knowledge is to basic and advanced literacy. They overlooked, too, the truth that culture has an inherent resistance to change, no matter how principled and dedicated the reformers. The evidence showed that general knowledge of traditional topics in history, science, civics, literature, and the arts was necessary to success, whether the situation was an SAT reading test, a white-collar job interview, or simply a newspaper over morning coffee. Hence arose the list of “What Literate Americans Know” that my colleagues and I compiled and appended to the book, a set of terms taken for granted in public and professional spheres (e.g., abolitionism, abstract art, Alexander the Great, antibiotic, etc.). Because of the traditional, mainstream nature of the list, however, people engaged in various efforts of cultural diversification objected. To them, cultural literacy per se stood as a roadblock to their aim of carrying out effective social activism and achieving greater equality. It looked too monocultural, Eurocentric, and status quo.

Perhaps so, I answered, but it was still the reservoir of knowledge assumed by the New York Times and presidential campaigns, college freshman courses and professional workplaces, and not to teach it to youths was to consign them to lesser futures. To get ahead in the United States, I argued, you had to master the intellectual tools of communication and power, whether you approved of those
tools or not. One could accept the admonition of liberal academ-
ics to follow the pronoun anyone with her but still not put money
in her purse. These critics entirely ignored the paradox that when
they deprived disadvantaged students of the dominant conventions
of middle-class culture, they were also excluding those students
from middle-class life—a misfortune that continues to be enacted.
Upper-middle-class households have always imparted much of the
knowledge that makes up that culture at home, where newspapers,
books, NPR and talk radio, museum visits, and professional ambi-
tions were commonplace. Students from lower-income households
have had to rely on schools to provide the knowledge implicit in
those media and experiences; but captive to bad ideas, particularly
to an adversarial attitude toward that knowledge, schools all too
often demurred.

A deeper point was overlooked in the debates and denunciations.
The purpose of Cultural Literacy’s analysis was not to perpetuate
a dominant group but rather to perpetuate democracy. Closing the
knowledge gap not only means more economic opportunities for
more people; it bolsters our republic. Citizenship requires broad,
shared knowledge, including democratic values and the large vocab-
ulary needed to communicate widely across all groups. In sum, the
book proposed both a social-justice aim and a patriotic aim.

The critics of Cultural Literacy lost the logical and scientific argu-
ment, but sadly they won the political one. The ideas of the book
have proved to be correct but have had little impact on education in
the subsequent decades. As far as I could tell, the book was excluded
from all syllabi in education schools, mentioned only as something
evil to be avoided. When I briefly taught in an education school,
the brave students who took my courses revealed to me that their
professors had urged them to stay away. Metaphorically speaking,
the book was burned. Although the notoriety of Cultural Literacy
was wide in the outside world, its influence on educational policy
was nugatory. Entrenched ideas are hard to change—all the more so
when they are shielded by high-sounding slogans about “cultural
relevance” and “social change.”