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## The American Anti-Intellectual Part 2

Daniel Johnson Salem-News.com

**America needs a second War of Independence and a new set of Founding Fathers.**

(CALGARY, Alberta) - (From Part 1: The optimist will argue that America has pulled out of difficult spots in the past. This is true, except that in the past there was no globalization, no economic juggernauts like China and India to contend with. Rome fell. The Ottoman empire fell. The British Empire (on which the Sun never set) also fell. Depending on the definitions you use for when the British Empire began and ended—it prevailed for between two hundred and three hundred years. Today's reality is a situation where American exceptionalism will no longer prevail. Nothing lasts forever.)



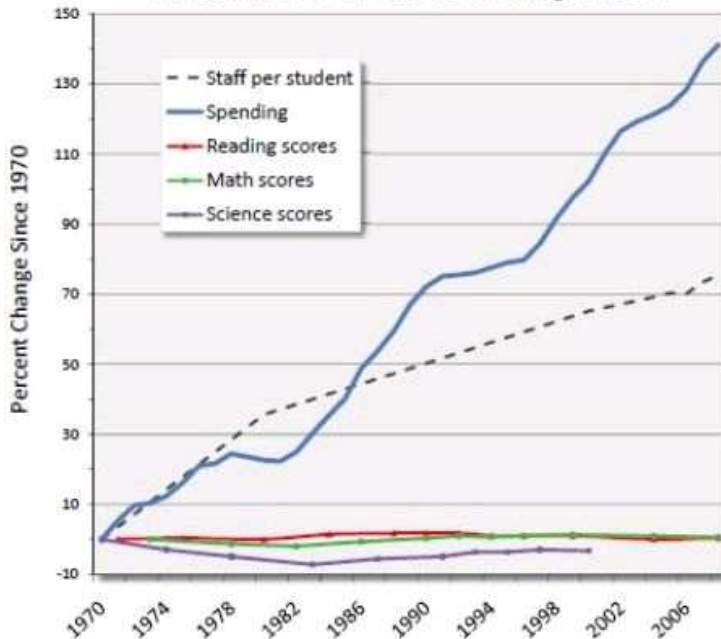
Courtesy: newmatilda.com

The observant reader of [Part 1](#) may have been struck by the omission of academics and professors in the class of *intellectuals*. This was not accidental. One person who objected to Part 1 was Andrew J. Coulson, Director, Education Policy, of The Cato Institute.

He wrote that "Some folks object to intellectuals like Krugman because they often get their facts wrong." But I only quoted Krugman on the danger to American society of declining educational standards. Many others are saying the same thing, independently of Krugman.

In his email, Coulson included this chart which tells its own story.

**Inflation-Adjusted Per Pupil Spending, staff to student ratio, and Achievement of 17-Year-Olds: Percent Change since 1970**



Cato Institute

Data sources: National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2008*, Table 181 (spending); *ibid*, Tables 32 & 33 (enrollment); *ibid*, Table 80 (staffing); National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Long Term Trends* reports (test scores).

Prepared by: Andrew J. Coulson  
Missing year spending and staffing values linearly interpolated or extrapolated



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Along the bottom you can see that test scores for reading and math have not changed



significantly over the last thirty years or so. But, test scores in science were down by nearly 10% in the early 1980s and have not recovered much since.

Spending has gone up nearly one and a half times since 1970.

In 1972, sociologist Stanislav Andreski published *The Social Sciences as Sorcery*. In his book he asked:

*"Which field of activity in America is the least efficient? And which employs the largest number of psychologists and sociologists? The plain answer is, Education. And in which field has the quality of the product been declining most rapidly? And where has the number of psychologists and sociologists been increasing fastest? Again: in education. Or, if instead of comparing it with other sectors within the society, we compare the American educational system with that of other nations, we get a similar result....I do not think that anywhere else in the world can you find students who have been going to school for at least twelve years but who can read only with difficulty, such as you can meet quite frequently in American universities".*

He was talking about the decline of the 1960s—which has continued apace. As York University Professor of Psychology Irwin Silverman wrote in 2003: "In 40 years as a university professor in Canada and the U.S., I have watched students' unremitting decline, through disuse of independent thought, judgment and personal responsibility."

Also in 2003, U.S. professor and intellectual Camille Paglia said:



*"My 1960s generation was far more rebellious about college as the alleged gateway to all future happiness. There's no rationale for this automatic mad funnelling of people through such an expensive process—especially since it so often proves culturally empty. . . . [G]eneral liberal-arts education is no longer what it was, and has become a huge scam. Can anyone honestly say that humanities graduates from the elite schools, with their obscene price tags, are showing a higher level of creativity in the arts and letters or in popular culture? Absolutely not! In fact, we're seeing dwindling knowledge and declining skills."*

Although there are a few exceptional individuals in colleges and universities, academe is not a reliable source of useful intellectuals.

In Part 1 I said that the thinking style of scientists and intellectuals was similar, but not the same. Scientists, outside their fields of expertise, can be as naive and as stupid as any ordinary citizen.

In the early 1930s, for example, the German physicist Johannes Stark (who had been awarded the Nobel prize for physics in 1919—for the Stark effect) became a fervent Nazi supporter and tried to establish himself as the "Führer of German physics" After Hindenberg's death in 1934, Hitler consolidated power and Stark sent telegrams to his fellow German Nobel laureates, inviting them to join in a public declaration of support for Hitler. Quantum theorist Werner Heisenberg and some others refused, saying that science and politics should not mix. Stark became angry, saying that the support was not political, but a patriotic act towards the German people. We know where that led.

Stark is a relatively extreme example, but in the history of science, over just the last century alone, there have been many examples of scientists who, although outstanding in their fields of expertise, made fools of themselves by venturing into politics or areas of public policy where they not only had no expertise, but also no clue.

### The evolution of economics

Economics pervades our lives. There is no aspect of living that is not affected, for better or for worse, by decisions made by people who rely on the expertise of economists—from local activities to global effects. The tragic thing about this is that the millions of ordinary citizens are whipsawed daily by these economic experts. Interest rates go up and down on the recommendation of these *experts*, as do tax rates and employment rates and many other things that intimately affect our daily lives.

*John Kenneth Galbraith, 1972*

**"Economists, on the whole, think well of what they do themselves and much less well of what their professional colleagues do. If a scholar probes deeply into a small section of the subject, he is fairly certain to mistrust, as superficial, the man who ranges more widely. The latter, in turn, will think the specialist lacking in vision or what is called reach. By knowing ever more about ever less,**



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*Cola Hills*

**he will seem to risk becoming quite ignorant. Those who are mathematically inclined see others in retreat from rigor. The others think those who manipulate symbols impractical. The statisticians believe those who prove points deductively to be dangerously intuitive. But, by their colleagues, those who are controlled by numbers are often thought unduly cautious or even dull. It is exceedingly fortunate for the psychic health of the profession that inadequacy lies so uniformly with others. The situation in the other social sciences is said to be equally satisfactory."**

*Leonard Silk, 1986*

**"Economists try to do what all scientists do—observe certain aspects of the natural or social world, gather data to measure those aspects, construct theories to explain the data, and test the theories against reality to validate or invalidate them. On the whole, however, economists do a weak job at all this. They commonly spend vast amounts of time observing each other's articles rather than reality. Their data are poor, and they devote little time to improving them. Their theories are rigid and mechanistic. And they rarely discard them unless some academic or government position is at stake."**

**BUT**

*Stephen Mihm, 2008*

**"Recessions are signal events in any modern economy. And yet remarkably, the profession of economics is quite bad at predicting them. A recent study looked at "consensus forecasts" (the predictions of large groups of economists) that were made in advance of 60 different national recessions that hit around the world in the '90s: in 97 percent of the cases, the study found, the economists failed to predict the coming contraction a year in advance. On those rare occasions when economists did successfully predict recessions, they significantly underestimated the severity of the downturns. Worse, many of the economists failed to anticipate recessions that occurred as soon as two months later."**

In 1968, Milton Friedman gave a lecture titled **"Why the American economy is Depression-Proof"**. He definitely missed the boat on that one.

So, we don't look for intellectuals among scientists or academics.

### **What is an intellectual?**

From the corporate viewpoint, Ferdinand Lundberg defines intellectuals as part of the broader group of "troublemakers, so much sand in the gears, [who] are especially unwanted and the place to spot them is at the personnel office, where the latest in psychological testing is put to use. Potential nonbelievers, doubters, scoffers, misfits and persons with 'negative attitudes' generally must be weeded out lest they contaminate a basically sound workforce and impede the flow of profits."

Intellectuals are, for the most part, nonbelievers. This is what sets them apart and makes them targets as nonconformists in a land of conformists. To use an analogy: An intellectual in today's society is like the sceptic at the Amway meeting who thinks the whole scheme is weird. As an intellectual, I have found myself in countless social situations in my life where I learned to keep my mouth shut among the believers. I'm the atheist in the fundamentalist church of capitalism.

An intellectual is a generalist—not an academic; nor a scientist; nor a specialist or even a journalist (as Michael Ignatieff noted in Part 1). I work as a journalist at Salem-News.com because I am free to write as I wish and say whatever I want. In the world of mainstream journalism, you toe the line or you're out, or at least marginalized. Been there, done that.

A term that has come into vogue in recent years is "public intellectual". Nobel economist (1976) Milton Friedman called himself a public intellectual. By the description I am developing here, he could not have been an intellectual. He was a conservative economist, *with an ideology to promote*. His fundamental belief was that *government is bad*. He was not open to ever considering the possibility that government might be good.

An intellectual is not only a generalist, but someone who is *open* to the world of ideas. Friedman and so many other so-called public intellectuals are not really open in that way, but instead look at the world through a particular ideology or frame of reference.

There's nothing wrong with this, in principle, because we *all* have a frame of reference through which we look at the world which predefines what we will see. Trouble arises in the social sphere when we are unable or unwilling to understand that frames of reference are valid for the holder but are not universal and are certainly not *absolute*. As Jungian analyst M. Esther Harding aphorized: "We do not fight a man to uphold a certainty, but only to force

him to accept our belief, our conviction, of the truth."

Philosopher Bertrand Russell summarized the psychological position: "No opinion should be held with fervor. No one holds with fervor that seven times eight is fifty-six, because it can be known that this is the case. Fervor is only necessary in commending an opinion which is doubtful or demonstrably false."

Milton Friedman demonstrates the fervor: "When I come to the question of the dispute and difference I have made with modern liberals, the conclusion I always reach is that the problem with modern liberals is not that their hearts are soft, but that their heads are." Everyone who didn't agree with him was wrong.

### **An intellectual example**

I describe an intellectual, in part, as *someone who is able to learn new things and reconstruct their worldview*. This is the fundamental reason why conservatives cannot be intellectuals. They are so absolutely convinced of their beliefs, it's obvious to them that *everyone else is wrong*. As a class, they are as open to the possibility of error as is Billy Graham on biblical inerrancy.

I present my last seven months writing for Salem-News as exhibit A.

#### *The Israeli Palestinian conflict*

When I started writing here in March, 2009, I held the standard view about the Middle East: Israel was a besieged country under constant threat from both the crazed Palestinians and nuclear wanna bes like Iran. I started reading some of the other pieces on the site, then decided to do my own research which resulted in a paradigm shifting piece on June 8: (My article, while not definitive, gives background that is not readily found or referred to in the MSM: ("[The Palestinian Counter-Holocaust](#)") It's true that some Palestinians have committed atrocities, but how much have they been provoked? Supporters of Israel won't even address this question. In other words, my whole view of the Middle East has turned around over the last six months. (If you have any comments to make, send them to me directly at my email address. The story is no longer on the main website and I will not see new comments. If you want to see all the related stories I've written, I've posted all the links on my website: ([Here](#)))

#### *Capitalism*

I've long been a critic of capitalism, particularly since I read Ferdinand Lundberg's *The Rich and the Super-Rich* in 1972. I have been, like most critics, just a knee-jerk reactionary, attuned to the details of the disaster that capitalism has visited on society and the world itself, both culturally and physically. A similar knee-jerk response to my critiques by adversaries has been to list all the benefits that capitalism has brought to society to refute me. Stalemate on both sides.

But, as I began to write about society, economics and capitalism, the larger picture started to come into view.

Adam Smith is generally regarded as the father of modern capitalism. But, the reality is that if Smith were alive today, he would vigorously denounce everything that is said and done in his name. He is widely quoted, but almost unread. I am one of the few (even among economists) who has read *The Wealth of Nations* and made detailed notes. I even published an imaginary interview with him, using his words. ([Here](#))

Smith has been best remembered for having said that a person "**by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.**"

There's nothing wrong with self-interest—it's a natural inclination we all possess. But, somewhere in the intervening years, *self interest* has come to be equated with *greed* which, while it is not really socially acceptable, is tolerated.

There's the famous soliloquy to greed by Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Gekko's words were based on a real life speech given at the University of California, Berkeley the year before by Ivan Boesky, who said: "I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself".

Greed, of course, is one of the seven deadly sins. Think of how much sense his statement would have made if Boesky had said:

"I think *gluttony* is healthy. You can be *gluttonous* and still feel good about yourself".

"I think *slothfulness* is healthy. You can be *slothful* and still feel good about yourself".

Put the others in yourself: **Lust, Wrath, Envy, Pride**. You don't have to be religious. None of them are social virtues.

My position on capitalism has shifted so now I say that *capitalism is fundamentally a*

*destructive, anti-social philosophy and way of life.* Milton Friedman is famous for saying that capitalism only works if there is a *voluntary exchange* between parties in each transaction. This has not been true for nearly a century. How free is the exchange between the consumer who walks into a supermarket and the seller? In 1932 economist E. H. Chamberlin described advertising as

*"selling methods which play upon the buyer's susceptibilities, which use against him laws of psychology with which he is unfamiliar and therefore against which he cannot defend himself, which frighten or flatter or disarm him—all of these have nothing to do with his knowledge. They are not informative; they are manipulative. They create a new scheme of wants by rearranging his motives."*

Advertising has made quantum leaps forward since then. In TV sitcoms, for example, often times the amount of money spent developing the commercials is greater than that of producing the show itself.

### **What can intellectuals do to help the United States?**

Intellectuals are outliers.

As philosopher Allan Bloom put it in his best-selling but little read 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*:

**"The regime of philosopher-kings is usually ridiculed and regarded as totalitarian, but it contains much of what we really want. Practically everyone wants reason to rule, and no one thinks a man like Socrates should be ruled by inferiors or have to adjust what he thinks to them."**

Intellectuals are not gods and they will not always be right in what they say or believe, but they do have the ability to transcend our daily culture and see a *bigger picture*. They can offer immeasurably more to the quality of our culture than can the likes of Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity—it's a very long list.

Before intellectuals can potentially help America, Americans have to help themselves. The first step is to *ignore the mainstream media*. The second step is to seek alternate sources of information. You won't necessarily know what you can trust (unless someone you trust recommends a site) but it's just a matter of trusting your own intuition. If something feels good and positive, it probably is.

The third step is to get involved in the management of your country. As an educated guess, I would say that 80%-90% of the senators and representatives should be turfed. (And, at the risk of appearing partisan--virtually 100% of Republicans.) They don't represent your best interests or even, necessarily, the best interests of the country.

I can sum it up in one sentence.

### **America needs a second War of Independence and a new set of Founding Fathers.**

Washington, Jefferson, Franklin *et al* **were intellectuals**. Find their modern day replacements. They're out there, waiting to serve.

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**Daniel Johnson was born near the midpoint of the twentieth century in Calgary, Alberta. In his teens he knew he was going to be a writer, which explains why he was one of only a handful of boys in his high school typing class—a skill he knew was going to be necessary.**



**Daniel began his journalism as a freelance writer in 1974. A few years later he was hired as a reporter for the *Airdrie Echo* in a town (now city) a few kms north of Calgary. Within a couple of years he was the editor but continued to do most of the writing and photography for the paper.**

**He expanded from there to do some radio and TV broadcasting for the CBC as well as free lance writing for *Maclean's*, the *Globe and Mail*, and a variety of smaller publications. He stopped trying to earn a living in journalism in the early 1980s, because he had no interest in being a hack writer for the mainstream media. Corporate writing, while lucrative, was also soul-destroying.**

**He turned his hand and mind to computers and earned a living as a programmer and software developer until he retired from that field in 2008.**

He has been writing exclusively for **Salem-News.com** since March 2009 and continues to work on a creative non-fiction book which he began in 1998. You can write to Daniel at: [Salem-News@gravityshadow.com](mailto:Salem-News@gravityshadow.com)

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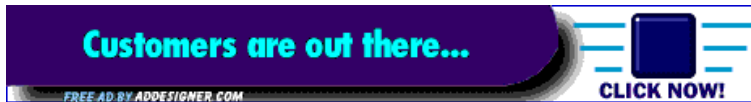
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