

The ignorant cannot educate other people

Contra Mundum

By Jeff Hoskin
Opinion Editor

Another semester is almost behind us. For some of you it was only your second; others (like myself) have been here so long you've lost count. Many of you will be graduating in just a couple of weeks. But are you truly educated? Yes, the time has come again for me to pontificate on one of my favorite topics: the appalling state of education in our society. The impetus for this particular diatribe was a pair of recent hackle-raising events. The first was an article which appeared in the October edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, entitled "The Near-Myth of Our Failing Schools". The second was and is my close acquaintance with education majors, two as romantic interests, another as a roommate.

First the magazine article. Written by Peter Schraig, one of the article's purposes is to destroy the myth that schools in America used to turn out legions of daVincis, as opposed to the near-vegetables we get today. And it does a good job, for example quoting a *New York Times* story from 1943 in which stated that "a large majority of [college] students" didn't know Andrew Jackson from Walt Whitman. However, as the article states, when someone charges that Americans are ignorant, proving that we have always been so is hardly an answer.

Schraig's piece contains much good. He mentions the federal (unfunded) mandate for special education, which claims much of the increase in spending education has achieved in recent decades. He also mentions the fact that comparisons of test performance between American and foreign students are often misleading, since educational systems vary so widely (in many countries only the best students are still in school at age sixteen, for example, so their high schoolers will certainly trounce ours). The article also mentions the myriad distractions present in American schools, such as sex education, multiculturalism, and diversity "training" (read: brainwashing). But he then goes on to blame educational failures partly on another "near myth": that of American poverty. And he uses this as an excuse to retain the current system of public-school monopoly.

On to the education majors. Last semester I dated two of them, and now I have one as a roommate.

All three of these young women are attractive, funny, and sweet, but none was what you would call intellectual. One of my former par-amours reads some fantasy fiction (sword-and-sorcery type stuff), the other two never read anything at all unless there's a grade depending on it. My roommate is planted immovably in front of the TV whenever she's home, and the more brainless the show the better (she favors "Three's Company"). She actually makes fun of my books and my Discovery Channel; she can't fathom why anyone would want to read poetry or history. I don't mean to insult these girls, all of whom I like and consider my friends. I know they all love children. They do not, however, love learning, which should be the first criteria for a teacher on any level.

And these students' lack of erudition or ambition to achieve any level of erudition isn't mitigated any by the training they receive. Syndicated columnist and Stanford fellow Thomas Sowell has written, "Given the incredibly bad courses in education that abound...intelligent people are repelled, while mediocrities and incompetents sail through." He also states, "Innumerable tests over many decades have shown that the mental test scores among people who specialize in education are among the lowest of any college students." A necessity of the educational process is that the educators be educated, correct? If we fill our prospective teachers' heads (in which space is seemingly at a premium) with multicultural mush, and claptrap about "self-esteem", how can they teach our students anything else? The self-esteem foolishness has been particularly damaging. We now produce students who feel really good about not knowing anything.

But, although educators, with their silly methods and militant unions, aren't helping, we cannot blame them alone for educational fail-

ures. Nor can we smugly point the finger at the public schools' monopoly (there is an education available in the public schools, or at least there was back in the Jurassic when I went through them). There are larger forces at work here. In grand liberal tradition, I blame society.

A raging anti-intellectualism is consuming our culture. TV is dominated by characters like Roseanne, defiant in her ignorance. Jim Carey has become immensely wealthy playing a psychotically stupid character. We elevate buffoons like Dennis Rodman to pop icons, ignoring more skilled but less flamboyant players like Hakeem Olajuwon. Only writers whose work easily translates to the movie screen gain real popularity, and only the most politically correct mediocrities among poets become celebrities. The current ideal seems to be someone who can recite whole episodes of "Seinfeld" or "South Park" but knows nothing about Keats or Locke; sort of a noble savage for the 90's. The phenomenon even extends to our language: the word "elitist" has become a deroga-

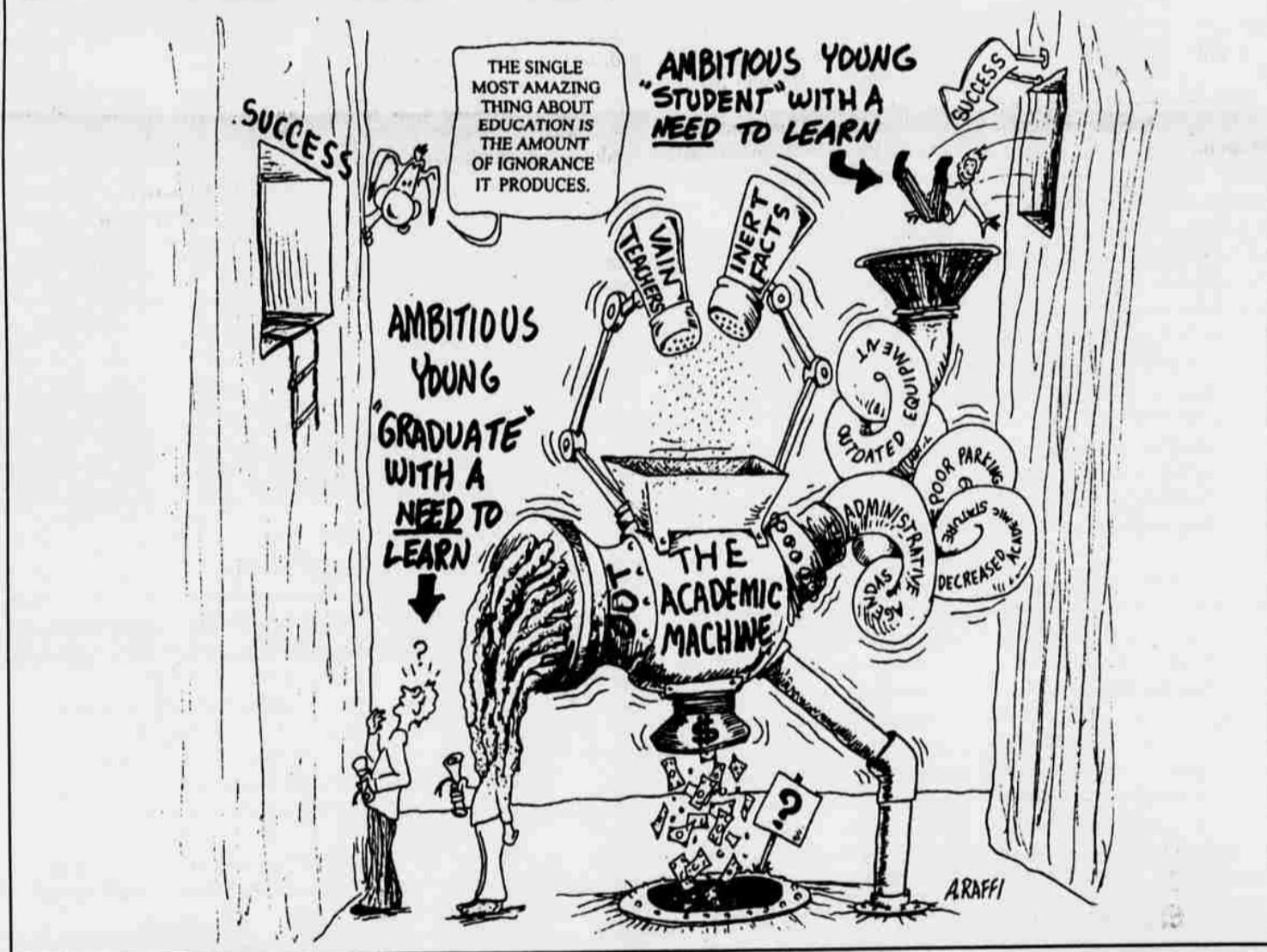
tory term. If elite means the best of something, then elitist means favoring the best. Who decided that was bad? The best is the worst; post-modernism strikes again.

So, back to our original question. Are you educated? Give yourself a quick test. Who wrote *Paradise Lost*? In which war was the Battle of Dunkirk fought, or that of Gettysburg? Can you tell a Caravaggio from a Cezanne? *Don Giovanni* from Don Ho? T.S. Eliot from George Eliot? Do you know what a neutrino is, or a mitochondrion? What's the closest star to our sun? What events led to World War Two?

Now, we shouldn't expect every modern high school graduate to be fluent in Latin or to have mastered calculus, but English and multiplication would be nice. And if you're asking why you need to know any of that stuff in the paragraph above, I guess you don't. But you should want to. Because you're students. Because knowing stuff is cool. Because being smart is better than being stupid.

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BY ALEX RAFFI



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4505 Maryland Parkway
Las Vegas, NV 89154
(702) 895-3479 office
(702) 895-1515 Fax
e-mail: ry@nevada.edu
http://www.nsvcc.edu/
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