

# Brain Dead;

*On the Assault on Intellectuals.*

An essay by

Joshua Michail

19 April, 2012

The value of being well educated should go without needing to be stated. It ought to be obvious, even to those who are not not so well educated, that education is so very important. In fact, it is as simple as being the most basic principle, education is the foundation upon which all human progress has been and will ever be built. First one learns, then one applies what one has learned. This is the most fundamental process to advancing our understanding of the universe, our technology and to improve every aspect of humanity. The intellectual pursuit is the greater accumulation of wisdom, knowledge and justice for all people. Education and intellectualism are inseparably tied together. The one is embodied in the other, they each depend also upon the other. Strangely, however, there are all too many people among us who would destroy these sisters of inalienable human quality. On the accomplishment of their desires, whether confessed or not nor whether fully contemplated, would be the extinction of our species. They would leave the last generation brain dead.

Recently, Rick Santorum, the former US Senator representing Pennsylvania and a Republican Presidential hopeful, had said that people should not get a college education. He actually said universities and colleges are “elitist” factories, as if being educated were somehow equal to being an elitist. Never mind, for now, that he used the word “elitist” wrongly in an attempt to mislead people. It seems to me that this incident is merely the more obvious surfacing of a long-existing problem. This is not the first time the words “snob” or “elitist” have been used to insult educated people. There is an abundance of reason to worry that the very idea of education, let alone universities and colleges, are under attack. Intellectuals have been persecuted throughout history, and yet they are the originators of modernity and higher standards of living. It seems strange that such people would be so maligned.

But, there are people who dislike the idea of someone else being smart enough to question false comforts and supposedly sacred beliefs. Certainly the daring truth-seeking makes many people uncomfortable. There are two types of people who enjoy the status-quo. There are those who fear change and want stability and traditions. They also want to be reassured that the beliefs they hold are acceptable and that they fit into some hierarchical design. Then there are those who wish to hold power over others, or at least to protect some profiteering racket. They are generally willing to do, or say, whatever needs be to do this, including influencing the opinions of the masses. The first group wish to stay comfortable and they see intellectuals as making them uncomfortable. The intellectual challenges their traditions and calls for change. The second group see intellectuals as 'rabble-rousers',

challenging to their authority and undermining their power. To the status quo the intellectual is a painful thorn in the side. Rick Santorum seems to be the epitome of both groups at once.

Intellectuals think, not to be redundant. They do a lot of thinking and, in fact, they usually do this as a career. They also tend to be smart and well educated. But, despite the dishonest use of words like “elitist” or “snob” intellectuals, and educated people in general, tend to be concerned with what is best for humanity. People like Santorum actually want to scare people away from getting an education. Even though, he has not just one, but two degrees from two different universities, he says that it's a bad thing for people to go to college. Santorum, by the way has a M.B.A. (Master of Business Administration) degree from the University of Pittsburgh and while that is a nearly worthless, easy to get, degree he also has a J.D. (Juris Doctor) from Dickinson Law School. Yet, he says that going to school will make people become heathens who will denounce god and that efforts to promote greater access to college for as many people as possible is an evil, presumably “Satanic” effort to turn people against god. He implies that religious uneducated people are superior to educated people who might not believe in god. So one must surely get the feeling that Santorum is a bit of a hypocrite.

Of course, Santorum could be merely pandering to a block of voters, upon whom he hopes to have suasion. He could also be acting like an elitist himself, and he could be fostering among the people, whose votes he hopes to get, a sense of themselves being superior. After all, the word “elitist” means one who believes him/her self to be superior to others. Reasonably, there is an issue here known in psychology parlance as 'transference', in which a person – or in this case, a group – project onto others, particularly some disliked group or person, that which is true of themselves. In other words, the people who protest educated people as “elitist” are the ones who are in fact the elitists. It's rather like the thief who accuses the person he stole from, and who is now wanting his property back, a 'thief'. It is politicians, seeking the power of the office, who exploit the baser nature of their voting block, and in doing so perpetuate a dishonest prejudice. They attack their opposition, and those even very loosely associated with the opposition. They attempt to make the opposition look bad in the opinions of the voters, in hopes of winning the votes, but in doing so they do so much damage to the integrity of the nation.

Nationalism is a political ideology that promotes the supremacy of the particular nation over all other nations. The truth is, that Nationalism is both “elitist” and anti-intellectual at the same time. This political view is that the government must favor the nation to the point that imports and immigrants are forbidden. 'National security' becomes a buzz-term and everyone is pressured to embrace a sense of exaggerated patriotism. In fact Nationalists see their country as being somehow “exceptional”, as in Santorum's “American exceptionalism”. The nationalist says that his/her nation is “god's favorite” and “our country is the greatest ever”. There is a horrific historical example of, not just what nationalism looks like, but also the connection between nationalism and anti-intellectualism. Nazis were Nationalists first and only slightly Socialist second. The Socialist part was not what made them evil, indeed the Nationalism played more to that point. An interesting notable is that most intellectuals have long advocated for socialism, while denouncing nationalism. The latter may have been part of the reason the Nazis persecuted intellectuals. In fact, Hitler's Reich rounded up, tortured and murdered intellectuals. Apparently not content with merely burning their books and banning their works.

When conservatives lambaste intellectuals as being “un-American” they are betraying their actual motivations. The conservative propaganda machine, largely exemplified in Fox News, paints a portrait of nationalism and hypocrisy. They throw the word “patriot” around as if they owned the trademark on it. Grandma, apple pie, big corporations, the good ol' days, the Stars and Stripes, the Founding Fathers, Jesus, guns, no immigrants and the like are the elements of their ideal of America. Communism is still the boogie-man for them, and worker unions are the most “communist”, or so they say. It doesn't get much more nationalist than “close the border”, “deny citizenship to anchor-babies”, “America is the greatest nation ever” or “America is god's muscle on earth”. Well, certainly the Nazis in WWII were somewhat more nationalistic.

But, there is clear reason for the conservative attitudes of Nationalism and Anti-Intellectualism. It is all about power. Corporations and billionaires want to protect their interests, their good times, and they want politicians who will do their bidding. Otherwise, the politicians might institute and enforce regulations that protect the economy and the people. To this end they dump millions of dollars into the campaigns of the political candidates who are likely to do their dirty work for them. And a central part of this agenda is education. After all, a well educated populous can see through the horseshit and will call the politicians out on their lies. So while they chip away at our liberties, one piece at a time, here and there, they are strategically weakening the possibility of resistance. Among other things, while

they weaken our liberty, they create Straw-man representations of the opposition and claim the opposition wants to take the people's liberties from them. They could never have gone straight for the brass ring, it would have not been tolerated. But the people wind up being less unified and present less of a strong opposition to each of the little, seemingly unrelated, attacks which occur over a long time.

So now we're at the point that the pandering corrupt corporate-owned politicians are shifting attitudes about education. They've gotten to the point that they openly claim that education is somehow “bad”, suggesting that those who are smart are not really American. Santorum is not the only one trying to imply this nonsense, but he is the most clear example. The greatest lie, the most absurd twist, is the fact that the anti-intellectuals are both eager to declare their so-called love of America – while while attempting to stylize themselves after our founding fathers – and at the same time they distort history to suit their needs. The fact is that most of the founding fathers were intellectuals. Thomas Paine wrote and published *Common Sense*, a booklet which encouraged the separation of the colonies from the crown and the formation of the United States. Benjamin Franklin strategically, and successfully, maneuvered to get the French king to support American independence from the British king. Franklin also publish quite a few of his ponderings on the nature of liberty. Thomas Jefferson was a lawyer and the author of our Declaration of Independence. John Adams and James Monroe were actually intellectuals also. In fact, many of the patriotic heroes – the patriot's patriots, one might say – were, by comparison with today's averages, quite well educated. The anti-intellectuals, at once, idealize their twisted view of the founding fathers while demonizing anyone who is anything like them.

While some may choose to blame the media, I don't. The reason is that the media is not really the originator of the shift in attitudes, but rather, the reinforcement machine. After all, the media is a business, it aims for the lowest common denominator. It is all about getting the most viewers, to get ratings that let the companies charge as much as they can for advertising. Certainly the media is not helping the situation, but it's also not the premiere offender. If the common people were better educated, on the whole, it is likely the media, in general, would be putting out more sophisticated content. After all, the people would be much more receptive to the higher standards of quality.

Knowledge is power, as the old adage goes, and education increases knowledge. If this is true then, would it not be true that to impede education – to discourage people from getting an education – is actually an attempt to make the people powerless? Rick Santorum echoes what many conservative religious people think, that getting an education makes people “stray away” from the “godly” lifestyle. Politicians and preachers, generally, do not want to let slip the power they wield over the heads of their subjects. To them education, especially outside of the total control of the church, is a serious threat to the power. Seneca the Elder is reported to have said *“Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false and by the rulers as useful”*. But, it's not true that universities make people leave their religions. In fact, there are many well educated people who continue believing in their deities after years of higher education, albeit most tend to shift their views. Many educated religious people tend to be more moderate and they try to make their religious beliefs fit around scientific knowledge, rather than the other way around. Our founding fathers established the United States as a Democratic Republic, but the current situation with super-wealthy corporate interests cooperating with religious conservatives is seeing America being pushed corruptly, insidiously, toward a Theocratic Plutocracy. A rule by the wealthiest unelected few couched in a system that claims “divine authority” to rule.

At the end, this effort to sure up the religion and the voting constituency for conservatives is dangerous. The religious conservatives and their bedfellows have gone to great lengths to obscure the facts about what they're doing. But, if one is aware, their actions are transparent enough. In the execution of the dumbing-down of the people, to make them more useful to the religious and political conservative leaders – and most secretively, the corporate profiteering puppet-masters – they may well damage the people far beyond even their own expectations. They would undo thousands of years of progress. All to satiate their greed and selfishness. And America, if not all of humanity, may be lost. But, this need not be our path. If people call the conservatives out on their nefarious efforts, if we make a strong defense for education and intellectual pursuits we may yet succeed in protecting humanity's progress.