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Intellectuals are Washington's Biggest Bootlickers

Washingtonians become vested in Leviathan the same way that residents of other big cities become vested in their local NFL franchise. Fashionable ideas are the intellectual equivalent of lapel pins of the American flag. Anyone who recites the latest phrase is credited with incarnating some grand idea or lofty principle.

Washington logic begins and ends with deference. People genuflect to power and then rationalize their kowtowing by screening out evidence of abuses. D.C. is the Valhalla of tautological reasoning by the Best and Brightest. The local rules of the intellectual game all favor big government.

This bias is propelled by the prevailing defects in “political reasoning.” Many people’s “political thinking” is little more than Pavlov buttons that rulers masterfully push. This is political thinking akin to a horse eternally balking at leaping over a very low hedge. The person sees the evidence, the trends, and then shudders at making even a little jump. It is as if people fear being lost forever in limbo if their feet leave the ground of safe surmises. Government schools and the mainstream media train citizens not to reach conclusions that condemn the existing political system.

If profound political errors were limited to people who have received little or no higher education, the problem would not be so perilous to democracy. But the errors of average citizens often pale in comparison to the follies of the educated elite. As legendary political scientist E. E. Schattschneider observed in 1960, “It is an outrage to attribute the failures of American democracy to the ignorance and stupidity of the masses. The most disastrous shortcomings of the system have been those of the intellectuals whose concepts of democracy have been amazingly rigid and uninventive.” It was the experts and intellectuals who

systematically slanted political thinking and pronouncements in ways that unleashed government.

The longer intellectuals reside in Washington, the more credence they give to official buncombe. Instead of being revolted by bullshit, they use it to fertilize their careers. Intellectuals are exploited to validate Leviathan and the political class, not for any wisdom they might confer.

Few things are rarer in Washington than thinking that goes beyond wrangling about how to best achieve goals decreed by politicians. Such “thinking” is usually little more than asking, “How can we best fulfill our master’s wishes?”

But in reality, few intellectuals bother thinking. Instead, they strike the poses fashionable in their class that season. Nobel Laureate economist Friedrich Hayek defined intellectuals as “professional secondhand dealers in ideas.” A person is accepted as an intellectual not as a result of a Renaissance-like grasp of many subjects but because of recognized expertise in one subject. Hayek stressed that intellectuals “judge all issues not by their specific merits but ... solely in the light of certain fashionable general ideas.”

Politicians perennially defer to existing laws and policies as if they were the codification of all previous wisdom on a subject. Government agencies defer to their previous rulings, the laws, and to their political masters. Judges defer to the bureaucrats, the politicians, and to shelves of court decisions that previously deferred to bureaucrats and politicians. The fact that the U.S. government occasionally loses in its own courts does as little to curb its power as the occasional peasant uprising trammelled the Czar of Russia. The larger the government becomes, the greater the presumption in favor of perpetuating its own power.

Intellectual deference to Leviathan is also cumulative. The more power government amasses, the more homage it receives. There is no need to pay cash on the barrel-head for praise. A single genuflection by politicians is often sufficient to win undying devotion.

Throughout history, intellectuals have tended to understate the danger of political power. There have been brief periods in which they bluntly or accurately reckoned the likelihood that rulers would ravish or repress subjects. As long as court intellectuals were treated royally, they indemnified rulers for any and all abuses of the peasantry. As French philosopher Bertrand Jouvenal noted in 1945, “Authority can never be too despotic for the speculative man, so long as he deludes himself that its arbitrary force will further his plans.”

“Respectable political thought” by definition is incapable of admitting the danger of power. Respectable thought begins by respecting politics — and ends up ignoring government crimes and lies. President George W. Bush could not have so easily suspended habeas corpus

if the intellectual elite had not previously convinced Americans that there is no danger of tyranny at home.

Right-thinking Washingtonians quickly learn to avoid outlaw inferences. An “outlaw inference” is any induction which would contradict a self-evident truth.

And who determines the self-evident truths? The political establishment.

Outlaw inferences can result in instant banishment from respectable society — and from the jobs and contacts which assure a steady cash flow and plenty of invitations to social events.

Washington’s self-evident truths function like an intellectual antivirus program — automatically deleting facts that contradict the verities upon which the political system rests.

At the time of the American Revolution, people recognized that the government’s authority to abuse one citizen put all citizens in peril. Blackstone, the British legal philosopher revered by many of the Founding Fathers, warned in the 1770s that for the government to kill a man or seize his property “without accusation or trial, would be so gross and notorious an act of despotism, as must at once convey the alarm of tyranny throughout the whole nation.”

The Founding Fathers fought the revolution based on early warning signals. They studied the words of British rulers and recognized the coming perils. But fewer people can hear the political alarm bells with each passing decade. Americans have been trained to view each government abuse in isolation. As long as liberties are snuffed piecemeal, no respectable person can say that there is a trend. Only alarmists worry about government abuses. Lessons drawn from political abuses are almost always isolated: that this particular politician should not have been trusted last time — or that particular policy was not optimal at that specific time.

The first principle of D.C. logic is that there is never enough evidence to condemn Leviathan. Conversely, almost any dubious assertion is sufficient to sanctify or expand government power.

The prevailing D.C. rules of evidence rest upon trust in the current regime. According to Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Col.), the key question regarding the 2002 congressional resolution to permit the president to attack Iraq was: “Do you believe in the veracity of the President of the United States?”

The Bush team sneered down any arguments against a rush to war. When Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was asked in February 2002 about evidence that Iraq supplied weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, he replied that “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” This was Leviathan logic at its best, but Rumsfeld was applauded for his retort. Childlike wordplay sufficed for a justification to commence bombing foreigners. The fact that

Rumsfeld's standard would permit the United States to attack almost anywhere was irrelevant.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz commented on the eve of the Iraqi government's release of a twelve-thousand-page report on its weapons: "If [Saddam] flatly denies that he has weapons of mass destruction, that's good evidence [of his guilt]. If he comes forth with new programs that we didn't know about, that's good evidence." Wolfowitz asserted that Saddam was guilty "until proven otherwise." In another forum, Wolfowitz explained the "standard" which Saddam must satisfy: "It's like the judge said about pornography. I can't define it, but I will know it when I see it." When the news media continued requesting evidence, Rumsfeld groused to the press corps on February 4, 2003: "The fixation on a smoking gun is fascinating to me. You all ... have been watching 'L.A. Law' or something too much." Rumsfeld earlier declared that there was almost nothing worse than a smoking gun: "The last thing we want to see is a smoking gun. A gun smokes after it has been fired. The goal must be to stop such an action before it happens."

No dearth of evidence could negate the U.S. right to attack Iraq. Charles Hanley, a 30-year veteran Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Associated Press, traveled from suspected weapons site to suspected weapons site with U.N. and U.S. inspectors in Iraq in early 2003. He reported, "No smoking guns in ... almost 400 inspections." Hanley said such lines "would be stricken from my copy because it would strike some editors as tendentious, as ... some sort of allegation rather than a fact." The "fact" that Bush administration assertions were groundless was inconceivable — or at least unprintable — to editors. Unlike most American political publications, Counterpunch never joined the stampede to mass carnage and consistently hammered the War Party's lies and crimes.

In July 2003, Americans learned that the Bush team relied on blatantly forged documents on Niger uranium to justify the war. White House press spokesman Ari Fleischer responded to the controversy: "I think the burden is on those people who think [Saddam] didn't have weapons of mass destruction to tell the world where they are." This was the most creative absolution for the Iraq war.

In November 2005, at a time when more critics were asserting that the Bush administration deceived the United States into war, Vice President Cheney declared it was "not legitimate — and what I will again say is dishonest and reprehensible" to suggest "that the President of the United States or any member of his administration purposely misled the American people on pre-war intelligence. The burden of proof was entirely on the dictator of Iraq — not on the U.N. or the United States or anyone else."

In other words, the burden of proof rests on anyone the U.S. government wants to attack. And U.S. government officials have the prerogative to dismiss any evidence foreign governments offer in their defense.

There is a dearth of honest thinking about government in Washington in part because the conclusions are largely preordained. Anyone who reaches the wrong conclusions is likely to be ignored.

In the summer of 2004, the Senate Intelligence Committee issued its first report on the Iraq war. Committee chairman Sen. Pat Roberts (R-KS) announced that “the intelligence community was suffering from what we call a collective groupthink” and that the groupthink “also extended to our allies and to the United Nations.” The “groupthink” verdict allowed the political herd to absolve its own stampede and helped defuse Bush’s biggest liability in his reelection campaign. The Senate committee postponed the release of a separate report on the administration’s deceitful use of the classified intelligence until after Bush was reelected.

“Groupthink” is not a problem: it is a career path for aspiring Washingtonians. An erroneous opinion is exonerated if it is shared by more than 80 percent of the experts. “Herd-certified” is the ultimate intellectual safety net.

The flip side of “groupthink” is the reflexive derision toward people foolish enough not to follow their betters. “Guilt by association” has a starring role in D.C. debates. The only grounds needed to make evidence inadmissible is that wackos believe such things.

In 2007, Fox News talk show host Bill O’Reilly declared that at the beginning of the war in Iraq, “everybody in the country [was] behind it, except the kooks.” Thus, O’Reilly was justified in disregarding all opposition of the invasion. The fact that war opponents were kooks made irrelevant the bothersome fact that they were right. The “kooks” included U.N. weapons inspectors, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, many foreign governments, and journalists whose articles were too controversial for print.

Though the evidence for attacking Iraq was empirically flawed, the logic remained politically impeccable. The New Yorker reported in late 2006 that some White House officials had concluded, regarding Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program, that “the lack of evidence means they must have it.” President Bush declared in August 2007 that “it’s up to Iran to prove to the world that they’re a stabilizing force as opposed to a destabilizing force.” Regardless of his own paltry record as a “stabilizing force,” Bush’s assertion failed to generate ridicule.

The fact that ideas often appear to drive public policy is no evidence that sound reasoning propels the ideas. Politicians use ideas to consecrate their pursuit of power. Logic often has

no more sway in political disputes than it does in fraternity drinking contests. As long as the ruling class has vast benefits to distribute, intellectual servility will continue to be lavishly rewarded.

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