STERLING KEYNOTE

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"I *Love* the Poorly Educated"

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"We won the evangelicals. We won with young. We won with old. We won with highly educated. We won with poorly educated! I *love* the poorly educated," exclaimed presidential candidate Donald Trump after winning the 2016 Nevada Republican caucus. The support of this last group was particularly crucial given that, of his total number of votes, fifty seven percent came from those with a high school education or less. However, in his statement, Trump was unwittingly summarizing what has been the objective of the political Right since the 1960s: to dumb down America while simultaneously raising the cost of college.

Allow me to provide some background. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill, was passed in 1944, just before the end of World War II. The benefits provided to wartime veterans included tuition and living expenses for high school, college, or vocational school attendance—unfortunately, however, Southern Dixiecrats in Congress ensured that the bill would help the fewest possible Black veterans. Of the 7.8 million veterans who took advantage of the bill for their educational advancement, nearly 2.2 million attended college or university. Consequently, the overall proportion of U.S. college graduates rose from around nine percent in 1940 to over twenty-three percent in 1972, the year that I received my bachelor's degree. Furthermore, as many of us know, much changed in the country during those three decades.

The Allied victory in the Second World War ushered in an era of a much longer-lasting conflict, the Cold War between Western democracies and the Soviet Union. As Winston Churchill confirmed in his celebrated 1946 "Iron Curtain Speech" speech at Missouri's Westminster College, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." A heated

race would soon follow between America and Soviet Russia for global, nuclear, and space supremacy. In 1948, China, though not involved in this geopolitical faceoff, also became an American adversary after Mao Tse-Tung's rise to power through revolution.

The Korean War (1950-1953), the first major military conflict after this ideological split, resulted in an armistice that allowed us to achieve "peace with honor," though without a winner—the war never officially ended because South Korea objected to the country's continued division and would not acknowledge its conclusion. As in previous hostilities since the Revolutionary War, many American combatants were conscripts—young men drafted into the military to assure that participant quotas were met regardless of voluntary enlistment. This compulsory enlistment was administered by the Selective Service System, which dates from 1917 and is still active today. Not all originally drafted enlisted. Some objected as "conscientious objectors" primarily on religious grounds (Quakers, Mennonites, etc.) and were not treated kindly by the authorities or by the general public. Others, particularly during the Vietnam War, opted to leave the country rather than serve.

The U.S. draft was officially implemented in 1863, during the Civil War, and it originally did not recognize conscientious objectors. It did however allow for personal substitutes for a $300 commutation fee, a policy that was amended in 1864 to recognize as objectors those whose religion forbade armed service.

World War I led to new circumstances regarding military enlistment. Massive immigration at the turn of the century brought to the nation hordes of those who opposed involuntary service in our armed forces for a myriad of reasons. Camps were thus set up throughout the country to determine the merits of their opposition; of these, nearly 4,000 objectors were sent to prison where some would remain until 1920. (Incidentally, the 1917 Jones Act granted American citizenship to Puerto Ricans from a need for cannon fodder.)

Our government drafted more than thirty-four million young men during World War II of whom approximately 72,000 applied for military exemption as conscientious objectors. Other than a few thousand Jehovah's Witnesses who went to prison, all either failed their physical examination or performed noncombatant service to the nation.

By the outset of the Korean War in 1950, the number of U.S.

college and university graduates had more than doubled since 1940 but, even more impressive, by 1956 almost half of the sixteen million WWII veterans had received an education or training through the GI Bill. In short, this Act made America a more educated nation. Enrollment continued to grow by the arrival on campuses of "baby boomers"—individuals born after the end of World War II when U.S. birthrates temporarily increased.

Not only were we Americans becoming more educated but, again after the Second War, as we were the only world power whose industrial infrastructure remained intact, our gross domestic product grew exponentially because of the absence of competitors for our manufactured goods. In addition, whenever possible, we ensured a commercial stranglehold in developing nations by putting in place what truly constituted (and would later be termed) "American Imperialism." Permit me to cite a case in point: after WWII and until the triumph of Castro's revolution in 1959, the U.S. allowed Cuba to export at least fifty percent of its sugar production at "highly protected prices." The stipulation, unopposed because of our manufacturing might, was that Cuba would purchase only American automobiles, refrigerators, television sets, clothes washers, etc., for its national needs.

Such unchallenged American hegemony naturally led to a close relationship between our military and the so-called "defense" industry, a euphemism used even today for weapon manufacturers. This unholy alliance immediately led to grave concerns within the country. In his farewell address to the nation on January 17, 1961, outgoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Republican, warned:

> As we peer into society's future, we . . . must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering our own ease and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow. . . . Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. . . . [Since then,] we have been compelled to create a permanent [one] of vast proportions. . . . We annually spend on military security alone more than the net income of all United States corporations.
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> Now this conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new. . . . The total influence . . . is felt in every [government office]. We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military-industrial complex.

This unheeded warning, along with a better educated youth and the

Cold War paranoia, would prove disastrous to the conduct of a then incipient Vietnam conflict.

Though our involvement in Korea was justifiable, in Vietnam it was not. As early as 1946, Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Viet Minh guerrillas fighting to expel the French from their homeland, wrote to President Harry Truman requesting U.S. involvement in convincing the French to grant Vietnam independence. However, so as to not alienate France as an ally against the Soviet Union and believing him to be a communist, Truman ignored the missive. After the French defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu at the hands of the Viet Minh, the area today known as Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel by the signing of the 1954 Geneva Accords. The north, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was conceded to the Viet Minh with Ho Chi Minh as its leader; the south, however, became the State of Vietnam under Emperor Bao Dai, thereby temporarily denying Ho control of the entire country. Elections regarding possible reunification were to be held in 1956. Ironically, the same President Eisenhower who had warned us against the military industrial complex, made certain that these elections never took place because of his fear of international communism.

In May 1961, a month after the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba, President John F. Kennedy sent Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, to assure corrupt President Ngo Dinh Diem of America's full support against the Vietnamese Communists, or Viet Cong, who had begun a guerrilla war against his government. By the end of 1962, 11,000 US military advisors were stationed in South Vietnam.

In 1964, the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which an American ship allegedly encountered a hostile North Vietnamese naval vessel, led Congress to pass a resolution that granted Johnson, by then president following Kennedy's assassination, the authority to use military force in Southeast Asia without an official declaration of war. Thus began the escalation of what would become our longest lasting war prior to this century. Now, let us return to how all of this would lead to the dumbing down and the spiraling cost of American education.

It is not coincidental, therefore, that the student antiwar movement also began in 1964. In California, where four-year public colleges and

universities were then tuition-free to state residents, UC Berkeley students involved in civil rights activism reacted to the university's "attempt to prevent them from organizing politically on campus." The Free Speech Movement arose to challenge the institutional restrictions on political speech and assembly. This faction led to others throughout the country, the most noted of which was Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at the University of Michigan. SDS "issued the Port Huron Statement that criticized U.S. foreign policy and attacked the Cold War assumptions underlying it."[1]

As President Johnson dramatically increased armed involvement in Vietnam—the 1964 Civil Rights Bill had by now become the law of the land—the war became the focal point of student political militancy and protests and demonstrations occurred nationwide. The political Right, obsessed with the threat of communism and strongly linked to the military industrial complex, feeling itself at risk, supported the "law and order" platform that elected Richard M. Nixon president in 1968. Seeking answers to the unrest, conservatives had concluded that postsecondary education, particularly the free California variety, was inimical to their aims.

Although political conservatives have been critical of universities—the liberal arts in particular—since the eighteenth century (Raymond Burke)[2], no political figure of the 1960s was more hostile to postsecondary institutions than Ronald Reagan. Elected governor of California in 1966, he immediately began to cut state funding for higher education and sought to eliminate free college tuition for state residents. At a Sacramento press conference on February 28, 1967, he openly declared his intentions to change the reason for attending college. When confronted about possible changes to higher education, he claimed that he had no intention of changing it. "But," he added, "we do believe that there are certain intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could [temporarily] do without." He referred, as an example, to a four-credit course at UC Davis on organizing demonstrations and observed that "carrying a picket sign is sort of like, oh, a lot of things you pick up naturally, like learning to swim by falling off the end of a dock." He then concluded that taxpayers should not be "subsidizing intellectual curiosity."[3] In other words, higher education should not be in the business of providing a liberal education, one that educates, but rather one, as he implied, that prepares students for jobs, i.e.,

occupational training. It was on that day in Sacramento that post-secondary education began its slow dilution.

Perhaps uncoincidentally, vocational orientation was, for generations, familiar to low-income high school students, particularly those of color. The process known as "tracking" was devised to separate students academically into different groups according to their intellectual ability. Though ostensibly reasonable, it had a dark side: it was often used by high school guidance counselors to convince low socioeconomic and minority students that their future lay in vocational training (known then as "a trade"), rather than college after graduation. The practice of "tracking" began to be phased out, not only because it tended to buttress segregation, but also because vocational program students would be limited to professions that might eventually become obsolete and were academically unprepared to adopt new careers.[4] And herein lies Reagan's solution to end student opposition to right-wing politics: turn universities into trade schools. Moreover, though Reagan repeatedly failed to end free tuition during his tenure as governor, he cut state funding to postsecondary institutions, thus forcing the California Legislature to raise fees. By 1975, fees and tuition were charged at UC schools—today, at levels comparable to their private competitors.[5]

But costs, though obviously important to collegiate consumers, should not be their primary consideration when seeking a degree. Just as one normally chooses a restaurant for the quality of its cuisine, folks should aspire to attend a college that will provide them with the best "education." Yet, let us be clear, prohibitive-cost tuition was not Reagan's primary intent; rather, he was trying to end "food quality" and—to continue the metaphor—replace it with a "hunger-appeasing quality." You see, by making students accrue large debts, you often force them to choose a major that will maximize earnings after graduation and make it easier to repay college debt. Consequently, in my 1970s college years, three quarters of incoming freshman sought an education that would provide them a better understanding of life, with a third of them feeling the same about being financially well off. Today, those numbers are reversed.[6]

You may ask yourself at this point what exactly did Reagan's eventual ending of free tuition in California has to do with the nationwide watering down of public college curricula. Well, given that fewer high school graduates chose trade school, undergraduate enrollment figures

swelled at postsecondary institutions. In addition, as the country prospered financially during the sixties, many came to view blue-collar jobs, such as welding or plumbing, as hard work that involved "elbow grease" and grimy conditions. College graduates were, after all, "white collar" workers who did not get their hands dirty and were respected by fellow citizens. Now, let us recall that, during the days of tracking, many high school students were not being prepared for college and did not take college prep courses like algebra, chemistry, and world history. Nonetheless, because trades were now considered inferior career choices, college applications rose considerably. (Junior colleges, today's community colleges, began to be frowned upon as well.) The Vietnam War also added to college enrollments. Male students received military deferments only if they were attending higher-ed institutions, not vocational schools. Men made up 58% of total college enrollment in 1970, my sophomore year.

Challenged by many college students during the Vietnam War through massive protests and needing larger numbers of military draftees, President Nixon, in 1969, put an end to undergraduate college deferments and implemented an annual lottery based on birthdates, i.e., draft numbers were assigned to days of the year in accordance with the order each day was drawn in the lottery. Males who turned 19 years of age that year were subject to being called up for duty on the following year; those already in college remained exempt for up to four years but became draft-eligible the following year. However, facing growing discontent over the American death toll, Nixon began to reduce the number of ground troops in Vietnam and turned to a policy of increase aerial bombings not only in that country, but also in areas in Cambodia and Laos suspected of sheltering the enemy. Nixon, finally realizing after his reelection in 1972 that the war could not be won, ended the draft altogether. After the 1975 humiliating defeat in South Vietnam, conservatives were then convinced that college kids, through their ceaseless opposition to the war and the draft, had been instrumental in the war's outcome. Reagan was right that their liberal arts education had taught them to question a policy that lined the pockets of the military industrial complex, far from having our national interest at heart, let alone bringing democracy to Southeast Asia. Soon after the debacle, overall college enrollment began to drop and, not only were students

at University of California schools paying fees and tuition, but also state governments throughout the country began to slash funding for public universities, a trend that continues today. For example, overall state appropriations for public colleges in 2016-2017 academic year was approximately $9 billion below its 2007-2008 level, after adjusting for inflation.[7] Though not directly connected to the aim of "watering down" education, these cuts hiked tuition costs and reduced quality. (Because of these funding reductions and significant tuition hikes, increases in federal aid have not kept up with students costs; the Pell Grant Program today provides "only 40 percent of the cost of attendance at a public four-year institution."[8])

A couple of other steps taken to downgrade education were, one, the relentless increase of university administrators at the expense of tenure-track faculty lines; two, the curtailment of professors' input in university policies. Between 1945 and 1970, faculty members had become much more involved in the administrative decisions of their institutions. By the late 1960s, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) "had begun to assert the faculty's consultative rights in all matters affecting college and university decision making" (Bowen, 86). It may be said that faculty members had an essential role in postsecondary administration during these days. However, by 1972, as John R. Thelin states:

> . . . the national job market for academics was reaching saturation, the expanding number of Ph.D.-granting programs were tooled up to assure a constant flow of new Ph.D.'s into the academic market for years to come. . . . In the array of problems facing presidents and boards, faculty were not a primary object of concern. One reason was that presidents and provosts enjoyed a buyer's market. . . . And since few tenured professors had the option to consider good jobs elsewhere, the balance of governance power shifted away from the faculty back to the administration. (102)

Such a shift was intentional. To illustrate this assertion, let us examine the politically arbitrary selection of certain university presidents where conservative trustees and politicians play a preponderant role. For example, the selections of Glenn McConnell, former South Carolina Lieutenant Governor, as President of the College of Charleston, and Jim Tressel, former head football coach at Ohio State University, as President of Youngstown State University, were made solely along

ideological lines since neither had the educational background or experience to hold these positions. The justification often given for these choices is they are better equipped "to run public institutions more like businesses" or that they will ensure that universities "will not be all things to all people." These hackneyed statements translate to "we will minimize the humanistic, socio-cultural aspects of your college degree so that you are unable to discern our objectives."

A succinct example of right-wing objectives (and contradictions) is Lynne Cheney, Republican and Chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1986 through 1992. Although the teaching of history had been eliminated as a general education requirement in several postsecondary institutions (to say nothing of K-12), she, claiming to be a strong advocate of the teaching of that liberal-arts discipline, criticized a college course in which students were taught that the Aztecs were innocent victims of Europeans and a people known for their capital city's beauty: "The Aztecs were sacrificing thousands of people in a single weekend, and their city smelled like a charnel house."[9] This statement perpetuates the European rationale for conquest and colonialism as it conveniently overlooks the killing of thousands of English subjects for religious reasons and for witchcraft during the same period.

The proliferation of non-academics heading and managing higher education has been an utter disaster. As Roy Ockert has succinctly put it:

> Increasingly, educational administrators claim they must compete with business and industry in offering salaries to administrators. In hiring professors, though, the strategy is to be competitive with other universities. Because of that and other factors, a chasm is developing between administration and faculty at many institutions, not only in terms of salary but also in educational theories, campus governance, and academic experience. Too many educational administrators have little or no training, which may profoundly affect their understanding of the institution's most important mission—the education of students.[10]

These types of appointments have been purposely made to erode postsecondary education. Could anyone among our members conceive of being named CEO of a hospital or head coach of a sports team? If by some chance this were to happen, I for one, if forced to

accept either position, would certainly enlist the counsel of medical professionals or that of former football players and athletic trainers. In public universities, the opposite occurs: more administrators with few or no academic credentials are hired so that they, rather than improve the academic quality of the institution, do not question the university president's often counterproductive decisions—after all, they serve at the pleasure of those who hired them. Logically, then, more adjunct faculty members are hired, at lower salaries, because, unlike tenured professors, they can be dismissed for opposing administrative decisions and, of course, their lower salaries more funds to hire administrators. In institutions where job-secure faculty abound, upper-level administrators often win over some of those involved in faculty "shared" governance through favors such as undeserved salary raises or perks. Such a practice undermines and corrupts full-time faculty.

But, not only are upper-level administrators chosen for their ideological leanings, also boards of trustees are loaded with politically appointed or elected members. As stated in a Chronicle of Higher Education piece last year:

> Many students and faculty members are politically left of center, but those who appoint and confirm the major power players at public flagship campuses most often are not. Among board members who were confirmed through a single-party political process, the majority were put in place by Republicans, outnumbering Democratic—appointed and—confirmed board members nearly two to one.
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> This says nothing of the dozens of trustees and regents who are directly elected, as happens in some states, or the government officials who sit on boards by virtue of their positions, including governors or their cabinet members. And in some states, board members can join through a governor's appointment or a single chamber's vote, with no confirmation process required.[11]

As mentioned, free or low-cost tuition has become scarce for the average student, who now must take on heavy debt to acquire a college degree. Given that it will take many years to repay their loans, it is understandable that many gravitate to college majors that will ensure higher earnings after graduation. This apparently pragmatic decision has increased enrollment in nonvocational professional degree programs to a point that, since the 1970s, only business and health science have

experienced significant growth in postsecondary-conferred degrees.

Professional or specialized degree programs began to enter higher education in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the result of the Morrill Act in 1862, which established the founding of land-grant institutions for the teaching of practical agriculture, engineering, science, and yes, military science—many of these would later become flagship institutions. Teacher training, previously provided at normal schools, as well as nursing, a health science, were introduced as university programs in the 1880s. Other non-traditional majors, like Criminal Justice for example, were introduced in the twentieth century. (Admittedly, many of these courses of study do not lead to high paying jobs but still diverge from what once was considered a classical education.)

The first undergraduate business school program in the United States was the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1881. Nineteen years later, the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College began to offer a business graduate degree, the precursor of today's MBA. Though far from being the latest vocational degree offered in college (Nursing, for example, became a degree program in 2009), a business major not only meets graduates' needs and expectations of quick job placement along with a higher salary, but it also has the least rigorous courses. In the words of Richard Arum:

> We found that students concentrating in business related coursework were the least likely to report spending time studying and preparing for class. If one considers simply hour spent studying alone, undergraduates concentrating in business coursework invest less than one hour a day in such pursuits. Given such modest investments in academic activities, it is not surprising that business showed the lowest gains on measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication.[12]

It is therefore no surprise that undergraduate business degrees are the most popular and that former President Donald Trump, an inarticulate narcissist, graduated from the Wharton School.

For reasons that I have tried to document here, most colleges and universities, particularly public ones, have perforce shied away from their mission. Their traditional purpose was to grant degrees in mainly nonvocational subjects and to provide a liberal arts education rather than professional training. The shift from this mission has been

disastrous because, when "the 'educated' citizens of a country are for too many decades not educated well, even the institutional centers of enlightened learning and debate become havens of ideology, intimidation, and mission drift."[13] (The recent, though later reversed, denial of tenure to Pulitzer-Prize recipient Nikole Hannah-Jones, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina, decries the so-called conservatives' meddling in postsecondary education.)

Such academic interfering to stamp out dissent has caused significant harm to our society. Political division, racial tensions, duplicitous and amoral leaders, fake news, increased violence, condoned sedition, religious zealotry, and betrayal of our allies are just some of the effects of dumbing down America. If we are to remain a democracy, our educational system must return to its humanistic core. As Henry Giroux has so aptly observes, "Higher educating [sic] is defaulting on its obligations . . . because the liberal arts and the humanities have fallen out of favor in a culture that equates education with training."

Notes

[1] https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1960s-america/a/the-student-movement-and-the-antiwar-movement

[2] https://areomagazine.com/2019/03/31/conservative-critiques-of-the-liberal-arts-a-reply-to-ben-shapiro/

[3] https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-day-the-purpose-of-college-changed/

[4] https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2014/09/09/the-troubled-history-of-vocational-education

[5] https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/from-master-plan-to-no-plan-the-slow-death-of-public-higher-education

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[7] https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/a-lost-decade-in-higher-education-funding

[8] https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1988/Federal-Funds-Higher-Education.html

[9] https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2000-07-28-0007280407-story.html

[10] https://uarktransparency.wordpress.com/2014/01/15/administrators-in-higher-ed/

[11] https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-new-order

[12] https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/04/17/why-look-down-on-a-business-degree/diluted-degrees

[13] https://www.chronicle.com/article/higher-education-is-drowning-in-bs/

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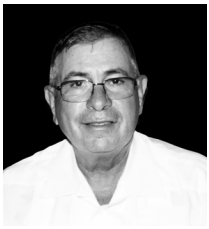

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