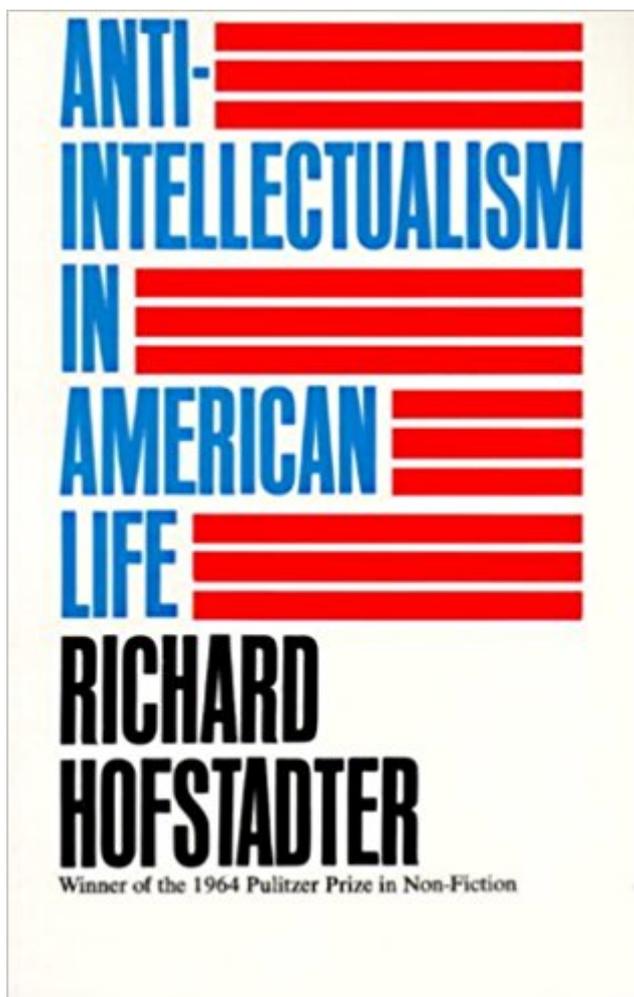


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# Anti-Intellectualism In American Life



## Synopsis

Winner of the 1964 Pulitzer Prize in Non-Fiction. In this award-winning classic work of consensus history, Richard Hofstadter, author of *The Age of Reform*, examines the role of social movements in the perception of intellect in American life. "As Mr. Hofstadter unfolds the fascinating story, it is no crude battle of eggheads and fatheads. It is a rich, complex, shifting picture of the life of the mind in a society dominated by the ideal of practical success." --Robert Peel in the *Christian Science Monitor*

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## Customer Reviews

"As Mr. Hofstadter unfolds the fascinating story, it is no crude battle of eggheads and fatheads. It is a rich, complex, shifting picture of the life of the mind in a society dominated by the ideal of practical success." --Robert Peel, *Christian Science Monitor* "The most comprehensive, succinct, and well-written one-volume treatment of the subject now available."--Walter Laqueur

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Hofstadter breaks his analysis of the history of matters of intellect in America by looking at three broad areas: religion, education in relation to labor movements and politics and changing philosophies on how children should be educated. While I found the discussion of historical labor

movements to be unconvincing as it relates to the grand topic of the book, his review of religion and approaches to education in this country are as relevant today as they were when the book was written in 1963.

**Religion in America**  
In early, dispersed America, learned preachers with their dry approach to religious services were less effective at filling the pews than charismatic laypeople. In response to the challenge, Protestant sects began to debate the value of formal education for religious leaders. Many early Americans believed that direct interpretation of the bible did not require formal instruction, that formal education might actually be an impediment to connecting with the spiritual world. The reverence for the formally trained seminarian began to slip and in many corners of American spiritual life, has never recovered.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the tensions between the intelligentsia and fundamentalists grew as the marketplace of ideas expanded and science began to offer more explanations for the natural world. Nothing highlights this conflict more than the public controversies surrounding Darwinism and evolution, a true turning point for American society that persists to the present day. Then, as now, parents became concerned that formal science instruction would rob their children of their religious faith. They saw resisting these scientific ideas as an struggle to defend their families, homes and very way of life. "Unknowledge" became preferable to tolerating threats to belief.

A strain of thought emerged in which emotion and instinct were valued over reason. Some saw the reliance on instinct as part of the frontier American spirit. America's very success was evidence that formal education was unnecessary. (After all, the country's pioneers never needed it to be successful.) A militancy of "100 percenters" emerged within whose ranks there could be no compromise, no dissent and no questioning--a "you're either with or against us" mentality.

**Education in America**  
Interestingly, the esteem for teachers has always been low in America and their pay has always been poor as compared to more highly valued business occupations. The inability to find teachers of high quality given these two factors has been a standard complaint in the U.S. that we hear even now.

Though most Americans are unaware of it, compulsory education was not a requirement in most states until the early 20th century. Labor interests were often responsible for driving enforcement of compulsory education into higher age ranges in an effort to reduce child labor exploitation (and protect adult workers from cheap competition).

The concern that students are poorly educated and are generally uninterested in education is long-standing as is the lament that our educational system is poorly resourced and often disgraceful compared to other developed Western nations. The problem of unwilling and hostile students appeared when compulsory attendance was extended into secondary school, another problem that continues to this day.

At the turn of the century, there was considerable debate over the role of the high school. Was it to provide students with life skills or prepare them for

college? Today, we naturally assume it's the former, but this is a relatively recent view. The very role of schools changed as a result of mass European immigration to the U.S. in the early 20th century. Schools began to assume the role of provider of life-skill instruction to immigrants whose children did not understand the native language and in some cases needed to be educated in the ways of basic hygiene in order to promote good health. This is yet a further drift away from the school's one time role as instructor of the classics, foreign languages and mathematics, curricula which Hofstadter's believes teach students how to think critically and creatively. At one time, it was thought that children who lacked aptitude or drive should be released from secondary school, that to keep them against their or their family's will was detrimental to the classroom environment and the advancement of other students. Discontinuing secondary school in favor of vocational education was seen as more appropriate for such students. But American democratic ideals demand that all students be treated as completely equal regardless of their aptitude or interest. In the 1940s and 50s, there was a push to match the educational system more closely to the needs of children who in an earlier time would have been deemed "uneducable." Alarming high school drop out rates are, contrary to evening news reports, nothing new. They've been a continuous American preoccupation since compulsory secondary schooling laws went into effect. Believing that everyone can be educated to the same standard, we have been chasing the dream of "no child left behind" ever since. Hofstadter's view is that academic standards have been so diluted in order to allow the lowest common denominator to achieve success in high school, that the curious and driven student is left neglected. In the least interesting, least compelling part of the book--the Conclusion--Hofstadter spends a lot of time mulling over the role of the intellectual in modern American life (in his case, the mid-1960s)...to me, a seemingly fatuous debate over whether American intellectuals (whatever they are exactly) have been co-opted by their acceptance of American culture. His thesis seems to be that if they're not complaining or otherwise decrying our political, cultural or capitalist system, they're no longer "true" intellectuals.

This book, now nearly half a century old, is necessary reading in this long political season when we find ourselves locally, nationally, and globally surrounded by emerging hordes of barbarians. In this study, the traditions of know-nothing-ism in American politics is placed in historical perspective. Examples from the past about suspicions concerning the life of the mind are telling to this very day. The divisive impulses that come with know-nothing-ism, prejudice, intolerance, suspicion, and fear-mongering are all on display and analyzed with great understanding and sometimes even compassion. It's comforting to know that we in the U.S. have occasional upwellings of our political

backsides, so much so that they can be considered normal in broad historical terms. But it's also discomfoting that the current rhetoric in 2015 seems and sounds even worse than ever before. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wishes to get some measure of understanding about why it is we live in times when science, facts, education, high culture, and human intellectual aspirations are considered suspect by some quarters of American society.

Hugely enjoyed this book. Providing insight, context and a historical background into the simple minded, sound bite driven American polical environment though it was written over 50 years ago. Reading this book has provided a safe haven in reason from this 2016 campaign riddled in short sightedness, showboating and pathologically self-absorbed narcicism.

It has been great fun to read this book. Better understand American political culture. Gain an appreciation for the competition among religious denominations at the time of the founding of American colleges and universities. Near the top of my list of books to read to help one survive the Trump administration.

This book is scary on the one hand, in that it was written a half-century before, but on the other hand, comforting that things may not have changed that much-- that maybe anti-intellectualism is a human condition that some of us must learn to deal with. It doesn't offer any quick-and-dirty treatment suggestions, but it does give a lot of insight to what I see in today's political climate. Sad, but life goes on.

A colleague mentioned this classic. I read it years ago, but misplaced my copy. Good to see it in Kindle format.

Helping me cope with todays lunacy! A good read indeed.

a classic exploration of the American character

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