IDIOT AMERICA

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How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free

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Atlantis as reinforcing the biblical account of Genesis, which showed at least that Donnelly’s work meant different things to different people.) The St. Paul Dispatch, the paper that had stood for him in his battles against Ramsey and the Washburnes, called Atlantis “one of the notable books of the decade, nay, of the century.” Donnelly embarked on a career as a lecturer that would continue until his death. He got rave reviews.

“A stupendous speculator in cosmogony,” gushed the London Daily News. “One of the most remarkable men of this age,” agreed the St. Louis Critic. And, doubling down on both of them, the New York Star called Donnelly “the most unique figure in our national history.”

CHAPTER TWO

The War on Expertise

This is a great country, in no small part because it is the best country ever devised in which to be a public crank. Never has a nation so dedicated itself to the proposition that not only should people hold nutty ideas, but they should cultivate them, treasure them, shine them up, and put them right up there on the mantelpiece. This is still the best country ever in which to peddle complete public lunacy. In fact, it’s the only country to enshrine that right in its founding documents.

After all, the founders were men of the Enlightenment, fashioning a country out of new ideas—or out of old ones that they’d liberated from centuries of religious internment. The historian Charles Freeman points out that “Christian thought... often gave irrationality the status of a universal ‘truth’ to the exclusion of those truths to be found through reason. So the uneducated was preferred to the educated, and the miracle to the operation of the natural laws.”

In America, the founders were trying to get away from all
that, to raise a nation of educated people. But they were not trying to do so by establishing an orthodoxy of their own to replace the one at which they were chipping away. They believed they were creating a culture within which the mind could roam, to its wildest limits because the government they had devised included sufficient safeguards to keep the experiment from running amok. In 1830, in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, James Madison admitted: “We have, it is true, occasional fevers; but they are of the transient kind, flying off through the surface, without preying on the vitals. A Government like ours has so many safety valves . . . that it carries within itself a relief against the infirmities from which the best of human Institutions cannot be exempt.” The founders devised the best country ever in which to go completely around the bend. It’s just that making a living at it used to be harder work.

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SLOWLY, but with gathering momentum, the realization is dawning on people that we have lived through an unprecedented decade of richly empowered hooey. At its beginning, Al Gore was vice president of the United States. He was earnest to the point of being screamingly dull. He was interested in things like global climate change and the potential of a mysterious little military project called Arpanet which, he believed, could be the source of the greatest revolution in communications—and, thus, in the dissemination of knowledge—since Gutenberg set his first line of type. Gore had the rhetorical gifts of a tack hammer. In 2000, he ran for president. He lost because of some jiggery-pokery in Florida and because of a Supreme Court decision that was so transparently dodgy that its own authors did everything except deliver it in a plain brown envelope. But he was beaten, ultimately, by nonsense.

He was accused of saying things he didn’t say, most especially about that curious little initiative that subsequently blossomed into the Internet. He told jokes that people pretended to take seriously. His very earnestness became a liability. His depth of knowledge was a millstone. (On one memorable occasion, a pundit named Margaret Carlson told the radio host Don Imus—and that would have been a meeting of the minds, if they hadn’t been two short—that she much preferred picking at Gore’s fanciful scabs to following him into the thickets of public policy, where a gal might trip and break her glasses.) By comparison, George W. Bush was light and breezy and apparently forgot during one debate that Social Security was a federal program. In fact, his lack of depth, and his unfamiliarity with the complexities of the issues, to say nothing of the complexities of the simple declarative sentence, worked remarkably to his advantage. As Jimmy Cagney’s George M. Cohan said of himself, Bush was an ordinary guy who knew what ordinary guys liked. That was enough.

This was not unprecedented. Adlai Stevenson’s archness and intellectualism failed twice against the genial Kansas charm of Dwight Eisenhower, but at least the latter had overseen the largest amphibious invasion in human history and the triumphant destruction of European fascism. Bush had no similar accomplishments, nor did he accrue any during his eventful first term in office. Nevertheless, four years later, at the end of August 2004, a Zogby poll discovered the critical fact that 57 percent of the undecided voters in that year’s election would rather have a beer with George Bush than with John Kerry.

The question was odd enough on its face, but a nation to which it would matter was odder still. Be honest. Consider all the people with whom you’ve tossed back a beer. How many of them would you trust with the nuclear launch codes? How many of them can you envision in the Oval Office? Running a
Cabinet meeting? Greeting the president of Ghana? Not only was this not a question for a nation of serious citizens, it wasn’t even a question for a nation of serious drunkards.

By the end of the second term, and by the writing of this book, the hangover was pounding. The nation was rubbing its temples, shading its eyes, and wondering why its tongue seemed to be made of burlap. Al Gore had moved along, putting his tedious knowledge of global climate change into a film that won him an Academy Award, a Grammy, and, ultimately, a share of the Nobel Peace Prize. He also wrote a book called The Assault on Reason. “Faith in the power of reason,” he wrote, “…was and remains the central premise of American democracy. This premise is now under assault.”

The national hangover seems to be moving into that moment when the light feels less like daggers in your eyes, and regret and guilt start flooding in to replace the hammers that have ceased to pound inside the head. This is that moment in the hangover in which you discover that your keys are in your hat, the cat is in the sink, and you attempted late the previous night to make stew out of a pot holder. Things are in the wrong place. Religion is in the box where science used to be. Politics is on the shelf where you thought you left science the previous afternoon. Entertainment seems to have been knocked over and spilled on everything. We have rummaged ourselves into disorder. And we have misplaced nothing so much as we have misplaced the concept of the American crank, with dire consequences for us all.

The American crank is one of the great by-products of the American experiment. The country was founded on untested, radical ideas. (The historian Gordon Wood argues that it was in the provinces, in America and in Scotland, that the ideas of the Enlightenment grew most lushly.) The country’s culture was no different from its politics. It ran wild, in a thousand different directions. More than anything else, the American crank is simply American, first, last, and always.

The American crank stood alone, a pioneer gazing at the frontier of his own mind the way the actual pioneers looked out over the prairie. American cranks fled conventional thinking for the same reasons that people fled the crowded cities of the East. They homesteaded their own internal stakes. They couldn’t have found the mainstream with two maps and a divining rod and, truth be told, they didn’t care to look for it anyway.

For example, largely because of the play and film Inherit the Wind, William Jennings Bryan has come down to us as a simple crank, but there never has been anything simple about the American crank. In his biography of Bryan, Michael Kazin describes the endless woodshedding that Bryan did in and around Nebraska, including an almost inhuman campaign schedule in his first run for Congress. He wasn’t moving the country. The country was moving toward him, long before he electrified the Democratic National Convention in 1896 with the “Cross of Gold” speech that made him famous. “Bryan was using his talent … to signal the arrival of a new era,” writes Kazin. The establishment politicians of the time had a name for Bryan and the people who rallied to his call; they called them the “money cranks.”

American cranks did not seek out respectable opinion. It had to come to them. It adapted to the contours of their landscape, or they simply left it alone. If it did so, that was fine, and if in doing so it put some money into their pockets, well, so much the better. Very often, it was the cranks who provided the conflict by which the consensus changed. They did so by working diligently on the margins until, subtly, without most of the country noticing, those margins moved. As the margins moved, the cranks either found their place within the new boundaries they’d helped to
to refute what the crank is saying, or to assimilate it into the mainstream. In either case, political and cultural imaginations expand. Intellectual horizons broaden.

The crank is devalued when his ideas are accepted untested and unchallenged into the mainstream simply because they succeed as product. The more successful the crank is in this latter regard, the less valuable he is to America. There is nothing more worthless to the cultural imagination than a persistently wrong idea that succeeds despite itself.

The failure of Idiot America is a failure of imagination or, more specifically, it is a failure to recognize the utility of the imagination. Idiot America is a bad place for crazy notions. It neither encourages them nor engages them. Rather, its indolent tolerance of them causes the classic American crank to drift easily into the mainstream, whereupon the cranks lose all of their charm and the country loses another piece of its mind.

The best thing about American cranks used to be that, if they couldn’t have the effect they desired, they would stand apart from a country that, by their peculiar lights, had gone completely mad. Not today. Today, they all have book deals, TV shows, and cases pending in federal court. One recalls the lament of Paul Newman’s ace con artist Henry Gondorff in The Sting: “There’s no point in being a grifter if it’s the same as being a citizen.”

It is, of course, television that has enabled Idiot America to run riot within modern politics and all forms of public discourse. It’s not that there is less information on television than there once was. In fact, there is so much information that “fact” is now defined as something believed by so many people that television notices their belief, and truth is measured by how fervently they believe it. Just don’t be boring. And keep the ratings up, because Idiot America wants to be entertained. In the war
on expertise that is central to the rise of Idiot America, television is both the battlefield and the armory. “You don’t need to be credible on television,” explains Keith Olbermann, the erudite host of his own nightly television show on the MSNBC cable network. “You don’t need to be authoritative. You don’t need to be informed. You don’t need to be honest. All these things we used to associate with what we do are no longer factors.”

Further, television has killed American crankhood by making it obsolete. Because television has become the primary engine of validation for ideas within the culture, once you appear on television, you become a part of the mainstream so instantly that your value as an American crank disappears, destroyed by respectability that it did not earn. Because it’s forced neither to adapt to the mainstream nor to stand proudly aloof from it, its imaginative function is subsumed in a literal medium. Once you’re on television, you become an expert, with or without expertise, because once you’re on television, you are speaking to the Gut, and the Gut is a moron, as anyone who’s ever tossed a golf club, punched a wall, or kicked a lawn mower knows.

The Gut is the roiling repository of dark and ancient fears. It knows what it knows because it knows how it feels. Hofstadter saw the triumph of the Gut coming. “Intellect is pitted against feeling,” he writes, “on the ground that it is somehow inconsistent with warm emotion. It is pitted against character, because it is widely believed that intellect stands for cleverness, which transmutes easily into the sly or the diabolical.” If something feels right, it must be treated with the same respect given something that actually is right. If something is felt deeply, it must carry the same weight as something that is true. If there are two sides to every argument—or, more to the point, if there are people willing to take up two sides to every argument—they both must be right or, at least, equally valid.

Dress it up and the Gut is “common sense,” which rarely is common and even more rarely makes sense. It often comes down to assessing what Everybody Knows, even though Everybody might be as false as blue money to the truth of things. The Gut is as destructive to the value of the American crank as television is. While television undermines the crank by making the crank instantly respectable, the Gut destroys him by forcing him into the procrustean bed of commercial salesmanship. Time was when the American crank forced the mainstream into a hard choice. It could come to him, engage him on his own terms, and be transformed; or it simply could leave him alone. The Gut changes the equation by adding the possibility that the crank can be a part of the mainstream without effecting any change in it. The component of imagination is gone. The crank then becomes simply someone with another product to sell within the unimaginative parameters of the marketplace; his views are just another impulse buy, like the potato chips near the cash register. The commercial imperatives of the Gut restrict the crank’s ability to allow his ideas to grow, lushly and wildly, to their fullest extent, and they deprive us of the crank’s traditional value. In exchange, the Gut becomes the basis for the Great Premises of Idiot America.

We hold these truths to be self-evident.

The First Great Premise: Any theory is valid if it sells books, soaks up ratings, or otherwise moves units.

In her book, The Age of American Unreason, Susan Jacoby mercilessly lampoons the very American notion that, because there are two sides to every question, both deserve respect and both must, in some way, be true. The Gut tells us that this is only fair, and we are a fair people, after all. All one has to do is muster an argument with enough vigor, package it well, and get enough people to buy both the idea and the product
through which it is expressed. The more people buy, the more correct you are. The barriers that once forced American cranks to adapt or withdraw—or even merely to defend—their ideas all have fallen. It is considered impolite to raise them again, almost un-American, since we are all entitled to our opinion.

“...The much lionized American centrist, sometimes known as moderates,” Jacoby writes, “...are in no way immune to the overwhelming pull of belief systems that treat evidence as a tiresome stumbling block to deeper, instinctive ‘ways of knowing.’”

Two of America’s best-selling authors present a good case study in what Jacoby is talking about. In 2008, a conservative writer named Jonah Goldberg shook up the best-seller list with the publication of his Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning. Apparently written with a paint roller, Goldberg's book is a lugubrious slog through a history without reliable maps, a pre-Columbian wilderness of the mind where, occasionally, events have to have their hearts ripped out of all context and waved on high to the pagan god of the unblinking sun.

The book is little more than a richly footnoted loogie hawked by Goldberg at every liberal who ever loosely called him a fascist. In that capacity, if not as history, it is completely successful. There are people who too blithely toss around the concept of fascism. Some of his gibes at liberalism are funny. If he had stuck with them, Goldberg would have stood as tall and as proud as any American crank before him. He even would have made just as much money.

Alas, his vengeful turgidity insisted on the conventional historical validity of its central premise—namely, that fascism is, and always has been, a phenomenon of the political left. Before Goldberg happened upon it, this provocative theory had eluded almost every serious student of fascism, including Mussolini. At one point, though, Goldberg seems confused about whom he’s arguing with, and he winds up quarreling with the voices in his head:

It is my argument that American liberalism is a totalitarian religion, but not necessarily an Orwellian one. It is nice, not brutal. Nannying, not bullying. But it is definitely totalitarian—or “holistic,” if you prefer—in that liberalism today sees no realm of human life that is beyond political significance, from what you eat to what you smoke to what you say. Sex is political. Food is political. Sports, entertainment, your inner motives and outward appearance, all have political salience for liberal fascists. Liberals place their faith in priestly experts who know better, who plan, exhort, badger, and scold. They try to use science to discredit traditional notions of religion and faith, but they speak the language of pluralism and spirituality to defend “nontraditional” beliefs. Just as with classical fascism, liberal fascists speak of a “Third Way” between right and left where all good things go together and all hard choices are “false choices.”

This is an altogether remarkable bowl of word salad, containing morsels of almost every tasty treat from the All U Can Eat buffet at the Hofstadter Café. Especially piquant is that passage about “priestly experts” and about how liberals—or liberal fascists—use science to discredit traditional religion, as though, somewhere in a laboratory, physicists are studying the faintest echoes of the big bang and thinking, at first, not of the Nobel Prize and the nifty trip to Stockholm, but, rather, “Bite me, Jehovah!”

The general does not improve at all when it moves into the specific. Goldberg asserts that Woodrow Wilson—admittedly,
a hopelessly overrated president—was nothing less than “the twentieth century’s first fascist dictator.”

Glorioski.

It seems that Wilson was a Progressive, and Goldberg sees in the Progressive movement the seedbed of American fascism which, he argues, differs from European fascism, especially on those occasions when he needs it to differ because he has backed up his argument over his own feet. Anyway, Wilson brought the country into World War I. Therefore, Progressives love war.

Of course, Wilson’s evil scheme was briefly derailed by a filibuster in the Senate in 1917. The filibuster was led by men who’d come from the same Progressive politics that had produced Wilson, most notably Robert La Follette of Wisconsin. It was so effective that Wilson memorably fumed against the tactics of “a small group of willful men” and fought for (and won) a change in the Senate rules that provided for the cloture system we have today. Every person involved in this episode—which involved no less important an issue than whether the United States would slide toward a war—was a Progressive. Caught in his astonishing assertion about Wilson, Goldberg deals with the filibuster by not dealing with it at all. This is no longer the admirable cri de coeur of a valuable American crank. It’s just a long-winded explication of an idea that’s wrong.

What Goldberg is to political history, Mitch Albom is to eschatology. Albom’s first breakthrough was Tuesdays with Morrie, an altogether unobjectionable stop-and-smell-the-roses memoir concerning his weekly conversations with a dying college professor. From these talks, the author learns valuable lessons about dealing with his fellow human beings.

Not content with passing along life lessons from real people, Albom branched out into the afterlife with The Five People You Meet in Heaven, a brief meditation on the great beyond that is what Dante would have written had he grown up next door to the Cleavers. It is the story of Eddie, who dies unexpectedly in an accident on the job at an amusement park. Eddie finds himself in heaven, which looks very much like the amusement park he has left behind. He first encounters the Blue Man, who explains to him what heaven is all about. The Blue Man, it turns out, is a guy who died of a heart attack after the youthful Eddie ran out in front of his car chasing a ball. In his life, Eddie was not aware that this had happened. The Blue Man explains that, even though he’s in heaven, Eddie’s not getting off that easily. He is handed the kind of emotional ab-crunching that the three spirits gave Ebenezer Scrooge one Christmas Eve.

There are five people you meet in heaven... Each of us was in your life for a reason. You may not have known the reason at the time, and that is what heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth... People think of heaven as a paradise garden, a place where they can float on clouds and laze in rivers and mountains. But scenery without solace is meaningless. This is the greatest gift that God can give you: to understand what happened in your life. To have it explained. It is the peace you have been searching for.

This makes Rick Warren read like St. John of the Cross. Compare it, for example, to the description of the New Jerusalem wrought by the half-crazed author of Revelarion, who never sat on Oprah’s couch and never got a movie deal—and who, it should be noted, has had his work pillaged without proper credit in recent times by movie directors and by best-selling Christian authors who turn Jesus into one of the X-Men:

And the building of the wall thereof was of jasper stone, but the city itself pure gold, like to clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned by precious stones. The first
foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacint; the twelfth, an amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, one to each, and every several gate was one of several pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.

Now, that’s a heaven worth dying for.

By contrast, Albom’s heaven sounds more than anything like the old Catholic notion of Purgatory. And it’s made up entirely of other people—which, as you may recall, was Sartre’s precise description of hell. Albom’s writing doesn’t have any more to do with actual theology than Goldberg’s does with actual history.

The one thing they have in common is that they both were genuine phenomena. They sold wildly well. This immediately worked to immunize both authors from the carping of those who saw no logical connection between organic food and the Nuremberg rallies, or who resisted a vision of Paradise in which you spent eternity being as bored with your relatives as you were in life. It was the way his book sold that liberated Goldberg to dismiss as “trade-guild historians” even those critics who had dedicated their lives to the study of the very history he tossed blithely into his Mixmaster. For his part, Albom has developed a lucrative second career as an “inspirational” speaker, charming audiences of suburbanites with a vision of heaven not overly different in its banality from the one presented at the Creation Museum, where that eunuch Adam lounges around the Garden of Eden.

Goldberg and Albom are both cranks. There is much to admire in a culture that can produce—and, indeed, reward—

their work. There was a time in which they would have had to build their own personal soapboxes; their success would have depended on how their work bent itself to the general marketplace of ideas, and the marketplace to their work. Instead, their sales have brought their ideas into the mainstream whole and undigested. These works are products, purely and completely. Goldberg’s target audience is made up of those conservatives who see themselves beset on all sides by powerful liberal elites. Albom’s comprises an anxious nation hungering for a heaven with roller coasters. This quest for conventional credibility devalues an American crank, and the more loudly the crank insists on it, the less valuable he is to the rest of us.

Which leads us, inevitably, to the Second Great Premise: Anything can be true if someone says it loudly enough.

Television sells. It sells notions as well as potions. It validates people and their ideas as surely as it does baldness cures and male-enhancement nostrums. Television is the primary vehicle through which America first misplaced its cranks, to the everlasting detriment of both America and the cranks. Commercial idiocy, for example, once required the deft mixing of noxious ingredients and the purchase of a stout wagon. It also required a keen eye, on the lookout for large groups of disatisfied consumers carrying pine rails and hemp ropes. Political idiocy required tireless work at the grass roots, endless nights haranguing exhausted, half-broke, fully drunk farmers about how you and they were being played by easy money, eastern bankers, and the Bilderberg group. When your theory finally swept the nation—invariably, it would be described as doing so “like a prairie fire”—nobody gave a thought to how many hours you spent honing your pitch out in the dark places where the cold winds do blow.

And religious idiocy—where, often, commercial idiocy and
political idiocy came together to be purified, sanctified, and altogether immunized against the ridicule they all so richly deserved—required at least a loud voice and a busy street corner. The Mormons picked up and moved west. The Millerites gathered on a hill—more than once—and waited vainly for the world to end. There was a certain work ethic involved that, even leaving God out of the whole business, sanctified religious idiocy through the sheer physical effort people were willing to put in on its behalf. You try to carve a thriving state out of the bleak Utah desert.

Once upon a time, then, peddling your idiocy for profit was an up-by-the-bootstraps activity, embarked upon only by those brave souls strong enough to withstand the possibility that, sooner or later, in a country that valued knowledge and progress and innovation as much as this one did, someone was going to discover a virus or invent a steamboat, thereby making a crank’s entire public career vanish.

Television changed every part of this dynamic. Idiocy can come to the nation wholly and at once and, because idiocy is almost always good television, it can remain a viable product long after the available evidence and common sense has revealed it to be what it is. Television is the sturdiest medicine wagon, the biggest grange hall, the busiest street corner. And it is always open for business. Get your ideas on television—or, even better, onto its precocious great-grandchild, the Internet, where television’s automatic validation of an idea can be instant and vast—and it will circulate forever, invulnerable and undying. The ideas will exist in the air. They will be “out there,” and therefore they will be real, no matter what reality itself may be. Reality will bend to them, no matter how crazy they are.

The sheer inertial force created by the effort people are willing to put behind the promulgation of what they believe to be true leads inevitably to the Third Great Premise: Fact is that which enough people believe. Truth is determined by how fervently they believe it.

On September 11, 2001, Ed Root of Coopersburg, Pennsylvania, was returning to the United States with his wife after a trip to Europe. Midway over the Atlantic, it struck Root as odd that they hadn’t yet been given their customs declaration cards. He asked the flight attendant about it, and she told him not to worry, that they’d been given the wrong cards for that flight. They were written in German, the flight attendant said. Root found this even more curious. Then Root felt the plane turn around. They were going back to Gatwick airport in London. There was a “security concern” about U.S. airspace, Root was told.

“A little bit further on,” Root recalls, “we were told that there were attacks in New York and in Washington, but nothing about Shanksville. So there was a brief period of time when I thought it was some kind of nuclear attack, and I thought everything I knew was gone.” Root had a son who worked in Manhattan and who, from his office window, had seen the second plane hit the World Trade Center. Root and his wife didn’t get home for almost a week.

At about the same time that Ed Root’s plane was turning back to Great Britain, United Airlines Flight 93, apparently headed for the U.S. Capitol, crashed in a field outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Passengers aboard the plane had apparently engaged the hijackers in a desperate struggle for control of the aircraft. One of the people killed in the crash was a flight attendant named Lorraine Bay. She was Ed Root’s cousin. In her memory, Root got involved with the effort to build a memorial to the passengers and crew of Flight 93 in the field where the plane went down.
In conjunction with the National Park Service, several groups, including a task force made up of members of the families of the victims of Flight 93, winnowed through more than a thousand responses from architects bidding to build the memorial. They settled on five finalists, whose designs were on display for several months. Ed Root, who by then had become the president of the Board of Families of Flight 93, was a member of the jury that settled on a proposal by Paul Murdoch, a Los Angeles–based architect whose previous work had included the Bruggemeyer Library in Monterey Park, California, and Hawaii’s Malama Learning Center.

Root was happy with Murdoch’s plan, a gently curved structure that would comprise the names of the forty passengers and crew of Flight 93 engraved in white marble, a line of trees leading into the memorial itself, and the Tower of Voices, a structure containing forty wind chimes. However, Root saw that one local man had noted on a comment card that the memorial seemed to be in the shape of a crescent, and that the man thought this constituted a surreptitious attempt by the architect to memorialize not only the passengers and crew but the hijackers as well.

Root thought little of it. The events of September 11 had become fertile ground for conspiracy theories. There were people who believed that the towers had been rigged to fall, that a missile had hit the Pentagon, that Flight 93 itself had been shot down by a mysterious white jet. This was just another wacky idea, Root thought. Either by accident or because it was purposely brought to his ears, a blogger named Alec Rawls heard about it and ran with it.

Rawls, a son of the eminent liberal philosopher John Rawls, was so sure that the memorial’s design was a subliminal tribute to radical Islam that he actually wrote a book, *Crescent of Betrayal*, that someone actually published. Rawls argued that the plot was clearly indicated by the memorial’s crescent shape, that it was oriented to face Mecca, and that the Tower of Voices was positioned so that it would function as a sundial that would point Muslims to the east for their daily prayers. Rawls also claimed that the design would include forty-four glass blocks along the plane’s flight path, one for each passenger and crew member as well as one for each of the four terrorists. There were no glass blocks in Murdoch’s design at all.

To believe Rawls, one has to believe that the National Park Service, working in concert with an architect and the families of the forty murdered people, developed a memorial that honors the murderers. In an earlier time, this idea might have been mocked into silence long before it got within a mile of a publishing house. But Rawls made noise, and the noise drew the media, and the noise was enough.

Rawls’s theories were picked up throughout the blogosphere—the conservative blogger Michelle Malkin was one of his earliest champions—and spread widely enough that a congressman from Colorado, Tom Tancredo, wrote a letter to the NPS championing them. Rawls also managed to convince at least one member of the jury in Pennsylvania that his claims were worthy of examination. “Alec Rawls should be listened to,” Thomas Burnett, Sr., told the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* in 2007. “If it turns out he’s all wet, OK. It’s hard for me to believe that this was all by accident.” Burnett’s son died on Flight 93, and Burnett requested that his son’s name not appear on the memorial.

The memorial commission spent hours consulting with religious experts who concluded that Rawls’s theory was so much conspiratorial moonshine. It paid for and issued a white paper refuting his claims. Murdoch changed the name of his design
from “Crescent of Embrace” to “Arc of Embrace.” He even
adapted the design so that it looked less like a crescent and more
like a semicircle. Rawls’s ideas kept circulating. Resentment and
ill-feeling suffused the project and ran through the region like
a low-grade fever. Rawls kept showing up at the meetings in
Pennsylvania. Ed Root refused to shake his hand.

Debate over the building of memorials is not uncommon. In-
deed, Kenneth Foote, of the University of Colorado, argues that
wide-ranging debate is a necessary part of the process, particu-
larly in situations regarding memorials of traumatic events such
as the September 11 attacks. “Debate,” Foote writes, “is an
essential part of honoring victims and preserving memory. . . .
Debate over what, why, when and where to build is best con-
sidered part of the grieving process.” However, Foote further
argues, such debate is productive only if it leads to a consensus
over the eventual memorial. Persistent hecklers, no matter how
well amplified, do not contribute to that process at all.

“Initially,” Root explains, warily, “it didn’t have any legs.
The only legs it had originally was in the blogosphere-type
thing. Very few of the mainstream media picked up on it, origi-
nally. . . . Over time, there’s been different benchmarks in the
process [of building the memorial] and, every time one of these
benchmarks happened, Rawls would come out of the wood-
work. He’d raise his head, and the blogs and everything would
start to come all over again.

“I mean, it’s a free country and he’s got a right to say what he
wants to say, and I think there are people out there for whatever
reason who are susceptible to conspiracies in this type of thing.
And I honestly don’t know that I’m qualified to judge those peo-
ple as to why they believe what they believe, but I think those
people have a tendency to make noise in greater numbers.

“It becomes more than a distraction. The park service, by
definition, they have to respond to citizen complaints, and my
belief is that the park service has bent over backwards to ac-
commodate this person—more so than any one person deserves
who came up with a theory that’s been debunked by every main-
stream person that I can think of.

“On a personal level, that anybody would think that I would
be in favor of anything that honors the people that attacked our
country and murdered a member of my family, well, it’s pretty
much of a reach, I’d say.”

Under the Third Great Premise, respect for the effort re-
quired to develop and promulgate nonsense somehow bleeds
into a respect that validates the nonsense itself. Religion is the
place where this problem becomes the most acute, where the
noble tradition of the American crank is most clearly spoiled
by respectability and by the validation bestowed by the modern
media. Push religion into other spheres—like, say, politics and
science—and the process intensifies. “Respect” for religion sud-
denly covers respect for any secular idea, no matter how crack-
pot, that can be draped in the Gospels.

Thanks to the First Amendment and the godless Constitu-
tion to which it is happily attached, mainstream churches flour-
ished in the United States. The country even made peace with
Catholics and Jews, after a while. Meanwhile, a thousand-odd
flowers bloomed: American Baptists and Southern Baptists,
splitting over slavery, and First Baptists, the grandchildren of
the slaves themselves. Anabaptists and Amish. Quakers and
Shakers. Splinters of all of them, forming and re-forming. A
main characteristic of many of these religions was that they
withdrew from the culture at large. They did not seek validation
for their ideas. They didn’t care whether they were respected.
They preferred to be left alone. The desire to be left alone sent
the Mormons to Utah and explains why the Amish still drive
their buggies through the hills of southern Pennsylvania. Some sects, for example the Shakers, took it so seriously that they died out almost entirely. Even American fundamentalism, shaken by the consequences of having won the Scopes trial in 1922, withdrew from secular politics entirely before coming back with a vengeance in the 1970s. Neither the country nor the faith was better for their return.

Susan Jacoby cites a writer named Carson Holloway who, in a 2006 article in the conservative *National Review*, called the British evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins a “poor public intellectual” essentially because Dawkins’s scathing critiques of all religions failed to take into account the feelings of their adherents. “It is hard to imagine,” Jacoby writes, “exactly how anyone might function as a public intellectual while taking care to avoid all issues that might trigger a spiritual, emotional, or intellectual crisis among his or her readers.”

Having freed up religion to grow in its own sphere, the founders went back to being invertebrate tinkerers and arguers. These were fundamentally curious men. (Before dispatching Lewis and Clark into the Louisiana Territory, Thomas Jefferson ordered the pair to categorize as many new plant and animal species as they found. Considering they were also mapping all the terrain from Missouri to Oregon, this must have been a considerable pain in the canoe.) Further, the founders assumed that they had established a polity that guaranteed their posterity would be curious as well. In 1815, appealing to Congress to fund a national university, James Madison called for the development of “a nursery of enlightened preceptors.”

It’s a long way from that speech to the morning of February 18, 2004, when sixty-two scientists, including a clutch of Nobel laureates, released a report accusing the Bush administration of manipulating science for political ends. It is an even longer way from Franklin’s kite to George W. Bush, in an interview in 2005, suggesting that intelligent design be taught alongside the theory of evolution in the nation’s science classrooms. “Both sides ought to be properly taught,” the president said, “so people can understand what the debate is about.”

The “debate,” of course, is nothing of the sort, because two sides are required for a debate. The very notion of a debate on evolution’s validity is a measure of how scientific discourse, and the way the country educates itself, have slipped, through lassitude and inattention, across the border into Idiot America. Intelligent design is religion disguised as science, and it defends itself as science by relying largely on the “respect” that we must give to all religious doctrine. Fact is merely what enough people believe, and truth lies only in how fervently they believe it.

If we have abdicated our birthright to scientific progress, we have done so by moving empirical debate into the realms of political, cultural, and religious argument, where we all feel more comfortable, because there the Gut truly holds sway. By the rules governing those realms, any scientific theory is a mere opinion, and everyone’s entitled to those. Scientific fact is as mutable as a polling sample.

The rest of the world looks on in wide-eyed wonder. The America of Franklin and Edison, of Fulton and Ford, of the Manhattan Project and the Apollo program, the America of which Einstein so wanted to be a part that he moved here, seems to have enveloped itself in a fog behind which it’s tying itself in knots over evolution, for pity’s sake, and over the relative humanness of blastocysts and the victims of Parkinson’s disease.

Kit Hodges is a scientist who studies the geology of the Himalayas, when he is not dodging the local Maoist guerrillas. Suffice it to say that Hodges’s data do not correspond to the six-thousand-year-old earth of the Creation Museum, whereupon dinosaurs and naked people do gambol together.

“Even in the developing world, where I spend a lot of time
doing my work, if you tell them you’re from MIT and you tell them that you do science, it’s a big deal. If I go to India, and I tell them I’m from MIT, it’s a big deal. If I go to Thailand, it’s a big deal. In Iowa, they could give a rat’s ass. And that’s a weird thing, that we’re moving that way as a nation.

“Scientists are always portrayed as being above the fray, and I guess to a certain extent that’s our fault, because scientists don’t do a good enough job communicating with people who are non-scientists that it’s not a matter of brainiacs doing one thing and nonbrainiacs doing another. The reason, for example, that the creationists have been so effective is that they’ve put a premium on communications skills. It matters to them that they can talk to the guy in the bar, and it’s important to them, and they are hugely effective at it.”

Bush was not talking about science—not in any real sense, anyway. Intelligent design is a theological construct—ostensibly without God, but with a Designer that looks enough like him to be his smarter brother—and an attempt to gussy creationism up in a lab coat. Its fundamental tenets cannot be experimentally verified—or, more important, falsified. That it enjoys a certain cachet ought to be irrelevant. A higher percentage of Americans believes that a government conspiracy killed John F. Kennedy than believes in intelligent design, but there’s no great push to “teach the debate” about what happened in Dallas in the nation’s history classes. Bush wasn’t talking about science. He was talking about the political utility of putting saddles on the dinosaurs and how many votes there were in breaking Ganesh’s theological monopoly over the elephant paddock.

* * *

There is still hope for any country that remains as easy to love as this one, in no small part because this is still the best coun-

try ever in which to be a public crank. The United States is an easy country to love because you can take it on faith that, at some point in every waking hour of the day, there is among your fellow citizens a vast exaltation of opinions that test the outer boundaries of the Crazoid.

Americans can awaken on a fine and sparkling spring morning happy in the knowledge that hundreds—nay, thousands—of their fellow citizens believe that space aliens landed in New Mexico, that Lyndon Johnson had John Kennedy killed from ambush, that the Knights Templar meet for coffee twice a month in the basement of the United Nations building, and that the Bavarian Illuminati control everything from the price of oil to the outcome of the fourth race at Louisiana Downs. Let us be clear. This is still the best country ever in which to peddle complete public lunacy.

“A silly reason from a wise man,” Mr. Madison once wrote to his friend Richard Rush, “is never the true one.”

We will have to sort ourselves out again here in America. We will have to put things back on the right shelves. We will have to remember where our cranks belong in our national life, so that they can resume their proper roles as lonely guardians of the frontiers of the national imagination, prodding and pushing, getting us to think about things in new ways, but also knowing that their place is of necessity a lonely and humble one. There is nothing wrong with a country that has people who put saddles on their dinosaurs. It’s a wonderful show and we should watch them and applaud. We have no obligation to climb aboard and ride.