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## In Defense of Elitism

Elitism has been out of fashion in America, but laudable though that may be in political and economic matters, in education we should remember the values espoused by leaders such as James Bryant Conant, who said, "Each honest calling, each walk of life, has its own aristocracy based on excellence of performance."

Horace Mann, a founder of the public school system in the United States, would be proud that so many Americans today qualify for higher education, but would be appalled by the seemingly inconsistent public loss of faith in academia and schooling generally. Along with the lowering of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores across the nation, grade inflation is rampant in colleges. Both problems are evidence of our reluctance to evaluate performance, an attitude which discourages competition, study, and achievement. There are other indications that our school system is not producing a truly educated public and does not encourage budding elites. It is possible to graduate from some high schools today without ever taking a course in science, studying a foreign language, or writing a research paper.

At the same time that our scientists have been increasingly honored in the Nobel Prize competition, there has been a ground swell of belief in pseudoscience and reaction against science. One senator periodically taunts scientists for "golden fleecings," and spokesmen for the new President have suggested that we should no longer strive to be world leaders in all the sciences. The United States reached preeminence in science and industry during World War II, in part because many top European scientists and engineers emigrated to this country at that time. The brain drain could take place in the other direction if conditions become sufficiently bleak here.

In China, between 1966 and 1976, intellectuals were denounced, belittled, and sometimes banished. The result has been tragic, especially for a culture which for thousands of years placed great emphasis on the life of the mind and which has contributed so much to the fund of knowledge of the civilized world. The Chinese have not only lost face as a nation, they have been hindered in making the technological and sociological advances needed to feed their population and improve their standard of living.

Can it happen here? There is more than one way to undermine a people's faith in learning, and we are already partway down that road. We have scorned to reward excellence in intellectual endeavor, and the average American today speaks only one language and has relatively little understanding of science or human behavior. We do not live in China, and the Golden Fleece award is hardly the same as banishment to the mountains of Yunnan. Yet we must find ways to keep alive the respect for education and intellectual achievement which has helped us attain our present standard of living. We must also remember that a republic cannot long remain both ignorant and free.

To avoid stagnation, we need two kinds of educated bodies—a public that appreciates and urges continued support for research and education, and an intellectual elite to provide both scientific and humanistic understanding to help us cope with the harsh realities of the physical world.

Aldous Huxley said that the great end of life is not knowledge, but action. True enough, but we would do well to heed the words of another intellectual who warned of taking action without the benefit of knowledge. During the eighth century A.D. the Chinese poet Han Shan wrote\*:

Body clothed in a no-cloth robe,  
Feet clad in turtle's fur boots,  
I seize my bow of rabbit horn  
And prepare to shoot the devil Ignorance.

—NANCIE L. GONZALEZ, *Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park 20742*

\*From *Cold Mountain*, translated by B. Watson (Columbia University Press, New York, 1970).