

News Gram

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"We're slimmed down for the summer!"

Moving through the Morass of Politics

by Irwin Savodnik, M.D., Ph.D.

ONE MIGHT THINK THAT POLITICS IS MUCH LIKE A LOT OF areas in which there are differences of opinion -- biology, physics, even mathematics, for example. Why don't people get upset about these disciplines as they do in politics? Actually, they do. In his book about the discovery of DNA, *The Double Helix*, Nobel Prize winner John Watson describes the tensions and competitiveness surrounding the search for a definitive answer to the problem. The whole project was anything *but* an academic exercise. The same is true in physics where Albert Einstein and those who agreed with him, lined up for a fight when Neils Bohr and his buddies insisted on interpreting subatomic behavior in a very peculiar way, a way that became the established mode of interpretation in quantum mechanics.

Still, politics is different. For one thing, virtually everyone is involved in popular elections and debating the issues, while only a tiny percent of the total population has anything important to say about biological or quantum mechanical issues. This point is, of course, something we should keep in mind but it is not at the heart of the issue. In the case of politics, what is at stake is a person's self-esteem, his or her sense of self worth. Philosophers may argue about obscure issues regarding the number of angels one can fit at the head of a pin, but there are not often fisticuffs at meetings of the American Philosophical Association.

Why self-esteem? How does that notion get tied in with political issues? This is a complex question, one to which it is hard to do justice in the available space. Let's see if we can't tease out some of the main points:

The political arena is one in which our values are publicly engaged. Some people like the idea of an active government that uses tax dollars to improve the lives of the poor, the sick, the elderly and the marginalized. They believe their government should initiate and manage programs that can ameliorate the sufferings of large numbers of people who are unable to improve their lots alone. On the opposite side are those who believe that government is the source of the social ills we see all around us. With less government involvement in our personal and commercial lives, we might, they argue, enjoy more fulfilling lives -- and for a heck of a lot less money than we are spending at the present time.

These two contrasting viewpoints tell us a good deal about the people who subscribe to one or another of them. For instance, someone who subscribes to the first viewpoint will likely enjoy the feeling of *altruism* he gets from it. Even though it may cost thousands of dollars in added taxes to fund the programs he believes will make things better, he will have the satisfaction of knowing he has done something



to help his neighbor. We all pitch in, he will argue, we help our neighbor -- and that's a good thing!

Not so, says his opponent. America was built on a foundation of rugged *individualism* where everyone is responsible for his or her well being. An intrusive government makes weaklings of us all. It does for us what we should be doing for ourselves. If people had tried to build a country under present conditions, they would never have gotten the project off the ground. Everyone would be waiting around for someone to do the spade work.

So, the first group tends to think of itself as a collection of altruists while the second group takes pride in being individualists. And such attitudes are closely allied with a person's sense of self, in particular with his or her estimate of their self-esteem. As a result, people will protect the point of view they have settled on more to justify their own assessment of their personal value than because what they believe in is right or true.

The implications of this aspect of what we may broadly refer to as the human condition is that moral or political principles take a back seat to the requirement of securing one's own awareness of personal value. Nobody will voluntarily change political affiliations if that change results in a loss of self-esteem. What consideration would reasonably justify such a transformation? Indeed, 'transformation' is a good word. Many people see a change in political loyalties as being akin to a religious conversion, which turns out to be a fundamental alteration in the self.

Given these considerations, there is good reason to avoid political discussions. On the other hand, when a person has doubts about his or her own political position, perhaps that's not a bad time to look inward and ask what it is within one's self that clings to a viewpoint that no longer seems adequate. For many, political change is personal change. —IS

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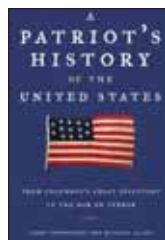
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SAVODNIK'S PICKS

A Monthly Review of Dr. Savodnik's Favorite Books-On-Tape

A Patriot's History of the United States

by Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen



SINCE THE 1960'S IT HAS been the style of many historians to denigrate the integrity of the United States. Spurred on by the prolonged conflict over the Vietnam War, many university-based historians, spurred on by the transient adulation of their undergraduate admirers, decided that the country of their birth really wasn't free, was no better than Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia and launched on career-long diatribes against America. That their arguments were, well, "neurotic", does not seem to have entered their minds, at least not in that narrow swath of researchers between Princeton and Berkeley for whom anti-Americanism belonged to a scholarly tradition well named by Tom Wolfe as "Radical Chic."

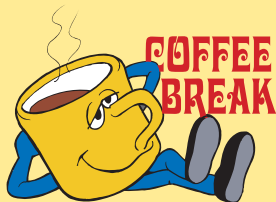
Of course, no reasonable person will assert that America is not subject to criticism. We are an enormous enterprise of nearly 300 million people and the idea that things are not perfect should not surprise any of us. But the critics I'm referring to are the *a priori* ones, those people who made up their minds to hate this country prior to doing any research beyond reading the morning paper. The result of their efforts has been a prodigious outpouring of historical writings that strike one more as personal confessions propped up by carefully selected historical evidence than real history.

One such Princeton historian is a fine exemplar

of the Hate America First crowd. In an article in the New Republic a few years ago, he objected in his smuggest voice to David McCullough's portrayal of John Adams, the award-winning book recently followed up by *1776*, a similarly fine piece of work. His argument was that McCullough was just too easy on Adams, who, he insisted was a terribly disagreeable man whose colleagues were lining up for a shot at his nose. His personal delight at demeaning one of the nation's Founders oozed out of the glossy pages of the magazine with all the grace of Uriah Heep.

Well, there's an antidote, namely, *A Patriot's History of the United States* by Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen. Both men are professors of history at the University of Dayton and the University of Washington, respectively. They mean to turn around the tradition of American Historical Deprecation, to set the record straight and leave their readers feeling good about the country that has provided them with considerable advantages. From the question of whether or not Columbus killed most of the Indians to whether or not FDR had advance knowledge about the attack on Pearl Harbor, they provide first-rate research in support of their arguments.

This is a mouth-watering book to read – slowly. It's devoid of the hyper-intellectual style of tenure-seeking academics who follow the fads of the moment. Instead, it's fortifying and committed to reconstructing historical events not with an eye to ideological fashion but toward the truth – all in plain English. Don't miss it! —IS



THE COFFEE BREAK QUIZ

The Mental Status Examination (MSE) is a(n):

- A. EEG
- B. EKG
- C. Xray
- D. Series of short psychological tests

ANSWER: D.
MSE is a series of psychological tests that measure cognitive, affective, behavioral and physiological functioning in a patient.