

IN ESSENCE

REVIEWS OF ARTICLES FROM PERIODICALS AND SPECIALIZED JOURNALS HERE AND ABROAD

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Cult of Experts

THE SOURCES: “What Do Experts Know?” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *National Affairs*, Fall 2009.

A BIG APPLAUSE MOMENT DURING President Barack Obama’s inaugural address came when he promised to “restore science to its rightful place.” As Wilfred M. McClay notes, the phrase, while short on specifics, suggested a change from the previous administration’s stance on “stem-cell research, environmental policy, public health, and the like.” Yet Obama’s administration spent its opening months grappling with “a financial crisis the scope and nature of which almost no professional economist anticipated,” which, McClay points out, very much calls into question the “rightful place of specialized expertise in our politics.”

It is not a new question. Beginning in the late 19th century, the Progressive movement looked to apply the latest objective social research to the ills of the age, and a few decades later,

President Franklin Roosevelt called on a “brains trust” to help craft many of his New Deal policies. But, writes McClay, who holds the SunTrust Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, “there is also a long and colorful history of fervent resistance” to incorporating “expert” ideas into governance. President Andrew Jackson was “notoriously suspicious of all



claims of expertise,” and campaigned hard against a “parasitic class of corrupt civil servants who . . . could make hay out of their monopolistic control of special knowledge.” Jack-

son’s example, McClay says, “testifies to the fact that democracy itself is necessarily at odds with expertise, and must insist that expertise be accountable to the populace, and to political and social considerations.”

Nonetheless, the latter half of the 19th century saw “bastions of expertise” erected in a number of professions—medical, legal, scientific, and scholarly—offering, so their adherents claimed, “depth of disinterested intellect, rather than the various imperfections of the democratic process.” Ever since, the two camps have existed in uneasy tension, the experts claiming

specialized knowledge policed by “self-correcting communities of peer review,” and the body politic affirming the “fundamental competence of every man . . . irrespective of educa-

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Three Flags

THE SOURCE: “Decoding the Flag” by Cheryl Dietrich, in *The Gettysburg Review*, Autumn 2009.

FOR LIEUTENANT COLONEL Cheryl Dietrich, a retired Air Force officer, the three flags she has owned carry more than just symbolic meaning. Her first flag—a 25-cent version she purchased at age 11 with the pooled resources of her two younger brothers and herself—adorned the “lending library” they had set up in their grandparents’ garage. A rambunctious brother fumbled, and Dietrich, watching in horror, saw that the “flag had touched the ground!” The only recourse for a flag so sullied was burning or burial, so the children dug a hole, recited the Pledge of Allegiance, and “solemnly shoveled dirt over the flag.”

That flag had the 13 stripes and 50 stars of the version in use since 1960, but Dietrich recalls the childhood shock of seeing the flag that in 1814 inspired Francis Scott Key’s “Star-Spangled Banner” at the Smithsonian, with its 15 stars and 15 stripes (which accommodated Vermont and Kentucky’s recent entry into the Union). Congress later fixed the number of stripes at 13, with the number of stars left to increase as new states arrived. “It is easy for us baby boomers and later generations to forget that the flag is designed to be a fluid, growing thing,” Dietrich writes. “Like the country.”

tion, social class, or material wealth.” Their coexistence, McClay observes, “never comes without a measure of chronic mutual distrust.”

There are, to be sure, technical areas that require expert guidance—nuclear power, infectious disease, and climate change, to name just a few. But McClay recalls Max Weber’s warning about the “iron cage” of rationalization. Technocrats, Weber argued, would not solve humanity’s problems but would bring about, rather, a world of “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.” Indeed, McClay believes, too often today difficult issues are “referred to appointed blue-ribbon panels as a way of escaping the heavy lifting of actual politics.”

At the same time, it is an illusion to think that “experts” are free of politics, groupthink, and other flaws. The noted economist Robert J. Shiller, who was an adviser to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York until 2004, recently admitted that he kept quiet about his growing misgivings over the housing bubble because he was afraid other economists would ostracize him. If cadres of experts can’t tolerate conflicting ideas, McClay says, their consensus “is soon rendered useless.”

Ultimately, McClay says, it is not just the fault of experts when they fail to foresee all the complexities of the modern world, but ours also, that we rely too much on their judgment. That’s not to suggest that specialists do not have a vital role in a democratic society, but rather that “we need to cultivate a judge’s skill in evaluating them—to be as expert as we can in the evaluation of experts.”

In the Air Force, Dietrich recounts, the flag was everywhere, so she didn’t own one of her own. A basewide command required all personnel to come to attention if they were outdoors whenever “The Star-Spangled Banner” sounded over the speakers. One day, sweating over a flat tire, Dietrich, then a first lieutenant, thought she might get by with ignoring the rule. She was interrupted by the “pleasant but firm” voice of a lieutenant colonel: “Suppose we stop and pay our respects to the flag. Then I’ll help you with that.’ . . . When the last note ended, the officer dropped his salute, picked up the wrench, and replaced my tire without a word of rebuke.” None was needed.

“The flag is strong. It doesn’t need our protection.”

Dietrich’s second flag, presented when she retired from the military after 20 years of service, had flown over the U.S. Capitol. By then there was not just flag burning but flag “idolatry,” or what she calls “domestic desecration”: the Stars and Stripes emblazoned on “T-shirts, jackets, bikinis, and thongs,” the flag as fashion, advertising, and personal expression. Dietrich, who opposes all laws against desecration, feels that “the flag is strong. It doesn’t need our protection.” Still, the sight of such disrespect stirs the flag burner in her—the reverential 11-year-old who believed that every despoiled or abused ensign must be given a