The Weekend Essay **Life & Arts**

Simon Schama: Trump’s war on knowledge

Attacks on Harvard and other universities are not just self-defeating — they are fundamentally un-American

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So many enemies: spineless judges, moaners about due process; fake news merchants; the Fed; Canadians (nasty); Europeans, same (except for Italy and Hungary); environmental hoaxers; regulators of shower pressure; cancer-causing windmills; tariff-haters; Venezuelans; the Cheneys. But the worst of the lot? Not even close. *Professors*! Radical left lunatics, or those soft on them, which is the same thing. Let's see how they like it when the money tap turns off.

The trigger-happy firing range that is the Trump administration has put America's universities squarely in the crosshairs. The more liberal the faculty, the heavier the hit: billions in federal grants stripped from Harvard, hundreds of millions from other Ivy Leaguers.

The purported reason for going full Mr Potter on America's great universities is antisemitism. Has the harassment and abuse of Jewish students been a serious problem, especially since October 7? Yes. Have anti-Zionist chants crossed a line into outright Jew-hatred? Absolutely. Are colleges doing something about it? Yes; grade of B+. But does kneecapping science departments by choking off their research funding persuade River-to-Sea chanters to pipe down? Hardly. Coming to the aid of campus Jews was always a pretext. Forgive us if we doubt that presenting the subjection of higher education's independence to an ideological purge, labelled "defence of the Jews", will work as an antidote to antisemitism.

People take to the streets in New York on April 17 for a 'Rally for the Right to Learn' © Reuters

Connoisseurs of oxymorons might enjoy the imposition, on pain of financial strangulation, of "viewpoint diversity" on colleges deemed to have undergone "ideological capture". But anyone doubting that the "existential terror" described by Christopher Rufo, the zealot of the campaign against universities, as his goal has been the main point all along need only look at the closing speech of the National Conservatism Conference in November 2021, delivered by JD Vance. He was then campaigning, bankrolled to the tune of $15mn by his former boss Peter Thiel, for an Ohio Senate seat.

Among the Republican audience, there might have been some inconveniently recalling Vance's withering attack on the political and moral credentials of one Donald Trump. What could be better, then, by way of demonstrating his true conversion, than descanting on America's "fundamentally corrupt" universities, institutions so irredeemably rotten that Vance had concluded it was necessary to abandon one of the cherished truisms of the American dream: a four-year college education. "Ladies and gentlemen," he warned, "we are giving our children over to our enemies, and it's time we stop doing it." All that happened in the grove of academe, Vance went on, was that students would "learn to hate their country and acquire a lot of debt in the process".

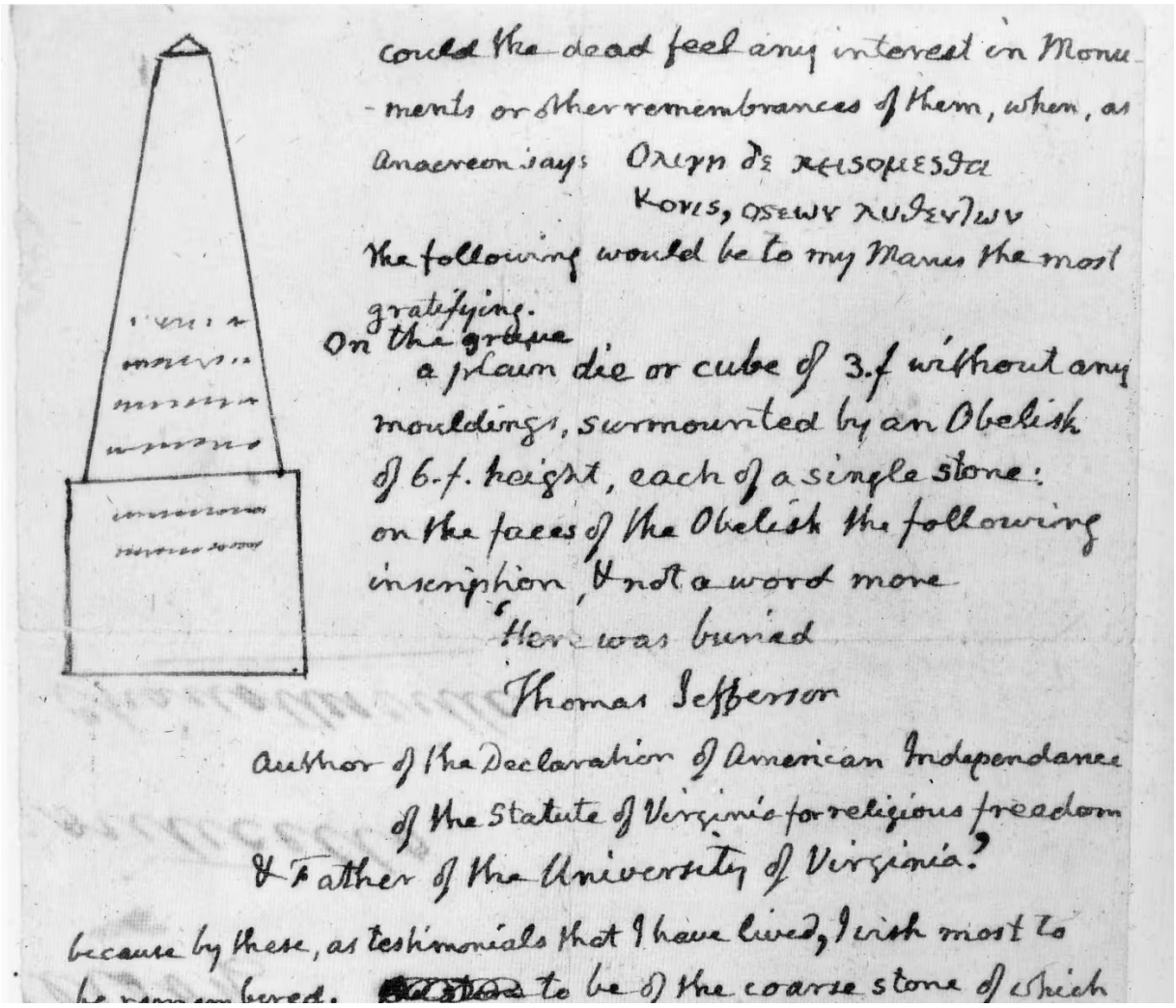
His peroration, to which, he said, he had given much thought, would feature, for his mic drop, a pearl of wisdom from "the great prophet and statesman" Richard Milhous Nixon. Speaking in December 1972 to Henry Kissinger (the most professorial member of his cabinet and sometime member of the Harvard faculty), Nixon had mused that "the professors are the enemy" — words Vance had clearly taken to heart. Their evil twin was, of course, the press. But Nixon returned to his mantra. "The professors are the enemy. Write that on a blackboard 100 times and never forget it."

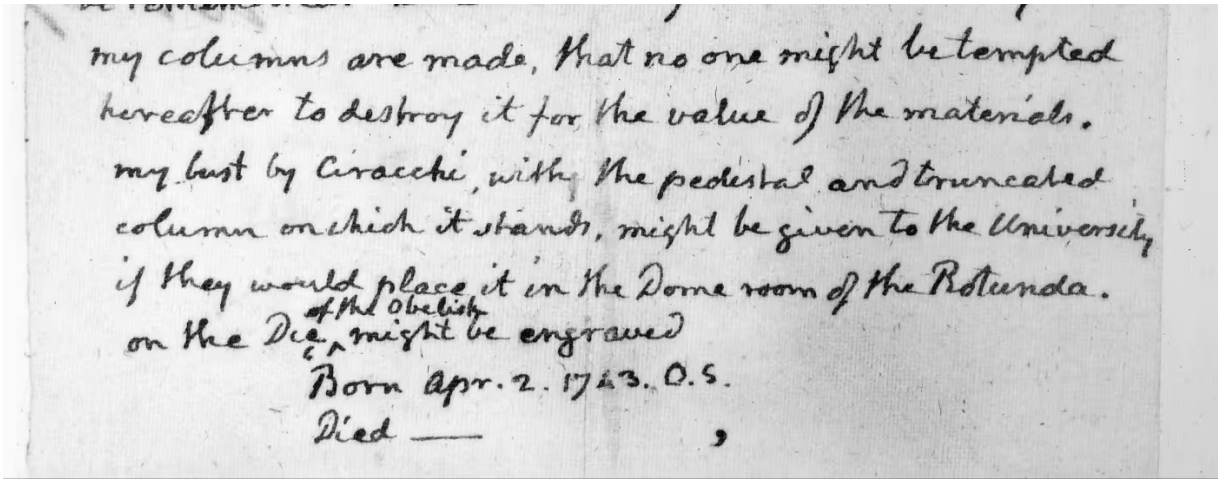
Which, evidently, Vance has not. But pinning the ills of America on a free press and a college education would have surprised the Founding Fathers, whose Declaration of Independence Trump will be commemorating next year, its 250th anniversary.

Washington's first address to Congress declared that 'knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness'

As the Founders saw it, the great driver of freedom was knowledge. Two decades before independence, the lawyer and essayist William Livingston insisted in a journal called The Independent Reflector that "knowledge among a people makes them free, enterprising and dauntless; but ignorance enslaves, emasculates and depresses them."

Whatever difference arose between Washington, John Adams and Jefferson following independence, it was a shared truism of the governing class that the very existence of the US as a free republic was conditional on a well-informed citizenry. Washington, whose first annual address to Congress in 1790 declared that "knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness", envisioned a national university in the capital that would rise above party factions in the ennobling pursuit of truth; though neither college nor partisan peace would be realised during his lifetime.




my columns are made, that no one might be tempted
hereafter to destroy it for the value of the materials.
my bust by Ciracchi, with the pedestal and truncated
column on which it stands, might be given to the University
if they would place it in the Dome room of the Rotunda.
on the Die of the obelisk might be engraved
Born Apr. 2. 1743. O.S.
Died ——

Thomas Jefferson's design for his own tombstone, including an inscription that includes 'Father of the University of Virginia' © Alamy

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson (who would make sure that his role as "Father of the University of Virginia" would be inscribed on his tombstone) championed a Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. Its purpose would be to "illuminate . . . the minds of the people at large" — excluding of course, women and the enslaved — "and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts . . . [that] they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes." The 1780 Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, primarily drafted by Adams, committed itself to "The Encouragement of Literature" so that "Harvard-College in Cambridge" would be the institution through which the diffusion of "wisdom and knowledge" ensured the health of the body politic.

As Richard D Brown's important history *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870* points out, all of America's first four presidents (including James Madison) assumed that the security of the republic depended on the "equation of virtue and knowledge". A century later, Calvin Coolidge might assert that "the chief business of the American people is business", but a rich stream of ideas flowing from the learned optimism of the Founders, through the creation of land-grant colleges and the "brain trust" administrations of Franklin Roosevelt, assumed that professors were not the "enemy" but a resource that was indispensable for the good of the nation. The true enemy of American democracy was not professors, but ignorance.

This was by no means a universal view. For all his pride in the University of Virginia, Jefferson, who dedicated himself to a "crusade against ignorance", lamented all the baseless slanders that came his way in the cacophony of politics. "So many falsehoods have been propagated," he wrote, "that nothing is now believed and . . . for want of intelligence they mourn[ed] on, [the people] are become lethargic and

want of intelligence they may rely on, [the people] are become lethargic and insensible."

It would not be the last time that the defenders of empirically confirmed truth would find themselves on the back foot. One of the great books of American history, the Columbia history professor Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life,* published in 1963, shortly after the Red Scare, chronicles the populist equation of highbrow with un-American. Hofstadter warns that, however tempting, the denigration of intellect ought not to be reduced to "eggheads and fatheads". For all the high-minded nostrums of the Founders, America's sense of its calling in the world was at least as much shaped by Christian evangelism as Enlightenment reasoning. The sovereignty of the feeling heart would have its way over the reflecting mind.

The early 20th-century revivalist preacher Billy Sunday, who warned that college graduates would go 'straight to hell' © Alamy

Ralph Waldo Emerson could inspire the Phi Beta Kappa class at Harvard in 1837 by holding up "the true scholar" as "the only true master" who would "resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism". But beyond Harvard Yard, multitudes would heed Billy Sunday, the early 20th-century revivalist preacher, when he warned that "thousands of college graduates are going as fast as they can straight to hell. If I had a million dollars I'd give $999,999 to the church and $1 to education . . . When the word of God says one thing and scholarship says another, scholarship can go to hell."

The demand for lockstep obedience is exactly why autocracies of knowledge always end up damaged by their intellectual self-harm

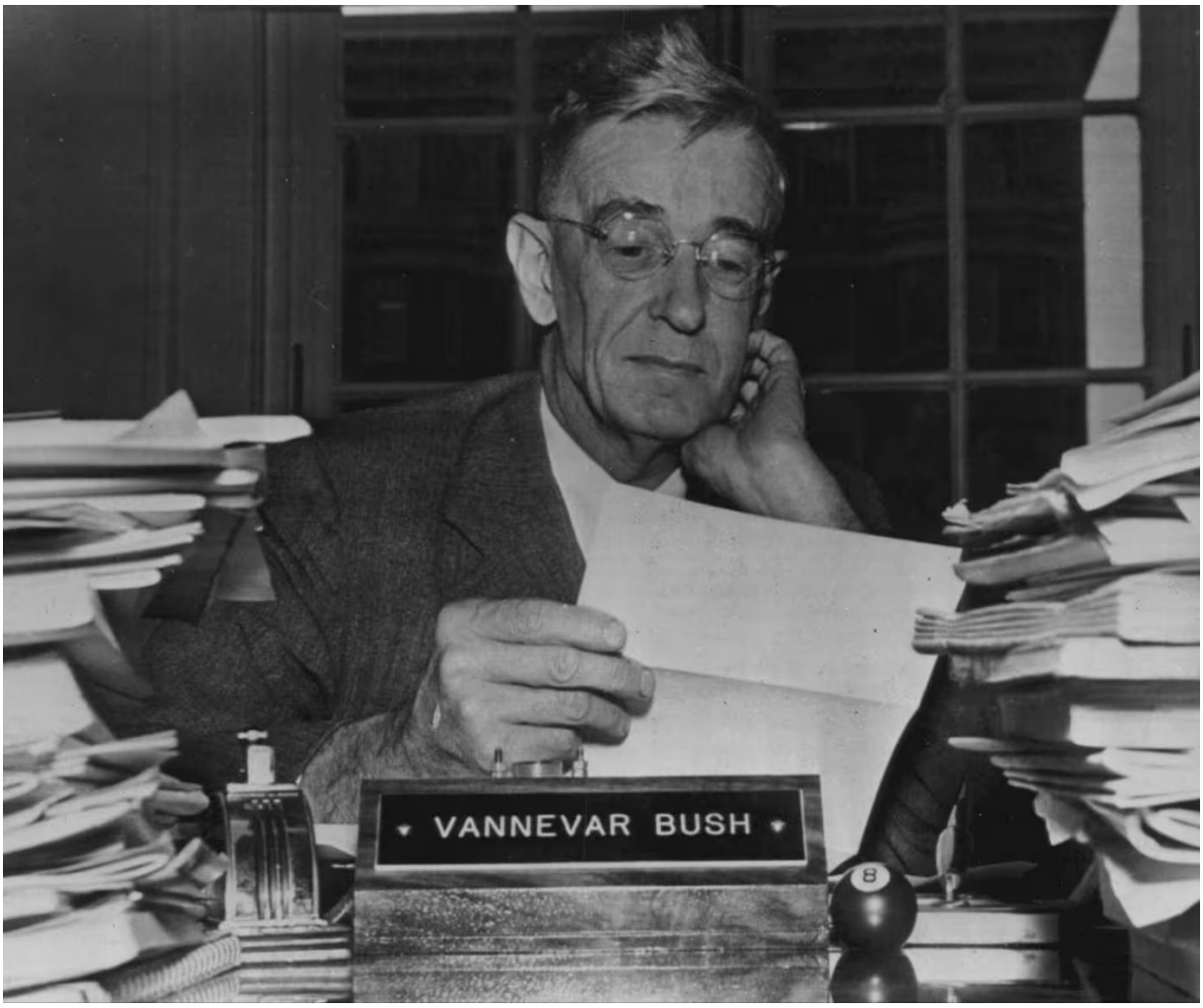
As the US flexed its military muscle and flowered economically, two more foes of excessive cerebration joined the fray. When, in 1828, Andrew Jackson soundly defeated the incumbent president John Quincy Adams, the son of the second president and himself a passionate believer in the federal government's role in creating and funding scientific institutions, the Jacksonites attributed their victory to their hero being a man of action rather than a man of learning. The choice, they said, was between "John Quincy Adams, who can write" and "Andrew Jackson, who can fight".

Half a century later, in the gilded age of the robber barons, the enfeebling intellectual, all brain and no backbone, alienated from the instinctual life of regular folk, ignorant of practical business, and milquetoast in their patriotism, became a dependable attack line. The great exception to being classified one way or the other was Theodore Roosevelt, overlooked by Donald Trump in favour of his peculiar fixation with William McKinley. But then Roosevelt saw his trustbusting as a natural projection of the rough-riding man of action.

President Franklin D Roosevelt surrounded by the members of his 'Brain Trust' in the 1930s © Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images

Brain trusts came into their own again when Teddy's distant cousin Franklin recruited two Columbia academics — the economist Rexford Tugwell and Raymond Moley, a professor of law, to the White House. Their influence on presidential decision-making was pounced on by the Republican foes of the New Deal as another example of out-of-touch professors imposing alien socialism on the American people. While FDR was contemptuous of the caricature, it worked well enough to push Tugwell out of government in 1936.

But even before Pearl Harbor, the need for scientific knowhow in fighting a likely war brought the professors back to the White House. In June 1941, and in response to a proposal by the MIT engineer Vannevar Bush, Roosevelt established the Office of Scientific Research and Development. Bush was its head, reporting directly to the president. The results of its work — mass production of penicillin for battlefield wounded, proximity fuses that transformed anti-aircraft fire, and, not least, the Manhattan Project — made an unarguable case for the partnership between government and university-based research science.



Vannevar Bush, the first head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development and 'one of the 20th century's most remarkable visionaries', photographed in 1947 © Alamy

Though given only a minor role in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer,* Bush was famous enough to feature on the cover of Time magazine. Largely forgotten now beyond histories of science, he was one of the 20th century's most remarkable visionaries, not least for his conviction that peacetime federal governments had an obligation to fund basic scientific research, liberated from the demands of commercial profit.

In the summer of 1945, Bush wrote two essays, both of which pointed to the future. The shorter piece, "As We May Think", published in The Atlantic Monthly, was devoted to his invention, the "memex" (short for "memory expansion"): a machine that would transform the capture of information by storing an infinity of microfilmed documents while providing "associative trails" that foreshadowed, albeit in analogue, the hyperlinks of the world wide web.

The longer essay, "Science, the Endless Frontier", was in effect a response to FDR, who in November 1944 had written to Bush that "new frontiers of the mind are before us" and asked him to think about how the momentum of wartime breakthroughs could be sustained in peacetime, in particular "the war of science against disease" and the "discovering and developing scientific talent in American youth".

Bush argued that since colleges were "the wellsprings of knowledge and understanding", they should be parties to research contracts with the government that would provide the necessary stability of funding for sustained experimental work. This would guarantee the "free play of free intellects working on subjects of their own choice, in the manner dictated by their curiosity for exploration of the unknown".

The National Science Foundation, created by Congress and signed into law by President Harry S Truman in May 1950, owed much to Bush's eloquence and vision — though its governance was not what he wanted. Instead of a director appointed by a board dominated by scientists, the head of the agency would be picked by the president. Nonetheless, Bush's ambition to bring science from the wings "to the centre of the stage" had been achieved and, in the decades that followed, became spectacularly fruitful in world-changing breakthroughs and Nobel Prizes.

It is this partnership of knowledge that is currently suffering brutal collateral damage from Maga's culture wars and the chainsaw massacre of expertise enacted by Doge. The continuity of funding that Bush saw as a condition of experimental

freedom has been smashed. The National Institutes of Health has already lost 1,200 of its staff, with threats of many more lay-offs. Good Friday was not so good for the more than 400 recipients of grants from the NSF who had their funding cancelled. Tellingly, research projects dealing with disinformation, climate science or anything attempting to advance science in under-represented groups have been singled out for punishment. The cuts have been partly based on a Senate report last October in which, among other conclusions, the term "biodiversity" was misinterpreted to imply deference to the now taboo DEI.

Faculty members at Columbia stage a protest earlier this month to express their concerns about the funding cuts and the university's response to them © Graham Dickie/New York Times/Redux/Eyevine

The crudeness of these exercises in political conformity is exemplified by the freezing of invaluable peer-reviewed journals such as Emerging Infectious Diseases, CHEST, specialising in asthma and pulmonary disease research, and the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. A letter sent by Ed Martin Jr, the interim attorney-general for DC, to the New England Journal of Medicine, demands answers to six questions, satisfying the authorities that "alternative views" are accommodated in their pages. But this is, in effect, DEI for Robert Kennedy Jr's dubious version of science, ignoring the strict peer-reviewed standards to which all journals adhere. The demand for lockstep obedience to the party line is the purest Sovietism and it is exactly why autocracies of knowledge always end up damaged by their intellectual self-harm.

Science is not the only casualty of the war on knowledge. President Trump has let it be known that he wants no "negativity" in the Smithsonian Institution's historical museums. History must now be mobilised in the service of national self-congratulation while the tanks roll down the Mall on the military parade the president is orchestrating for his 79th birthday treat.

But that is not what my trade's founders had in mind at all. And one of them, a military man, Thucydides, wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* as an exercise in Athenian self-criticism, building as he does to the hubris-heavy catastrophe of the expedition to Syracuse. In doing so, he laid down the rules of our professional code of practice. History is neither an exercise in vain self-glorification nor is it penitential polemic; rather, and most simply, the retrieval of evidence in pursuit of the truth.

But though the Founders would all have read the Greeks, it's a reasonable bet that the 47th president has passed them by. So instead of reflection on the significance of 1776, we will be getting a National Garden of American Heroes, some 250 statues that are by definition an entirely dumb personification of history. Just this month the National Endowments for the Humanities and for the Arts have both been informed that 85 per cent of their grants have been cancelled and that funds supporting countless projects of research and artistic expression across America would be diverted to the garden to meet the bill, reportedly coming in at between $100,000 and $200,000 per statue.

Among Trump's original pick list, there is one unlikely hero (at least for the president). Alphabetically sandwiched between Susan B Anthony and Louis Armstrong is Hannah Arendt, historian, philosopher and author of, among many other things, a powerful essay on "Truth and Politics". You must hope that her statue will feature the obligatory cigarette together with an ironic smile, knowing that she provides a plinth text that Donald Trump is bound to appreciate.

"Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it. Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it."

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