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The Election of Donald Trump and the Decline of the Expert[1]

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Introduction: Save Agrabah!

What does the election of Donald Trump mean for the making of foreign policy? On the campaign trail, candidate Trump said that experts were terrible—he was talking about China policy at that moment—and he asked if it would be so bad if he didn't bother with them. As President, Trump seems determined to test that challenge in real time, leaving behind a string of foreign gaffes and reversals from Taiwan to NATO in less than 100 days in office. Americans who voted for Trump are so far not inclined to hold him responsible for these blunders, in part (one must assume) out of sheer stubbornness. But there is a more disturbing possibility at work: voters in the United States refuse to hold Trump accountable for his errors because they do not know enough to realize they are, in fact, errors.

The American public—leading the way in a problem that is now showing up throughout the developed world—is resolutely uninformed about foreign affairs. This is more than the usual lack of engagement with international affairs that has characterized the American electorate in previous years; instead, it is part of an overall trend in which ignorance about complicated matters is now celebrated as a virtue in the United States. Worse, this ignorance is propelling strong views about foreign affairs, despite the lack of knowledge behind those views. Donald Trump did not create this problem, but he exploited it masterfully in 2016 and it is now a centerpiece of his approach to foreign policy as president.

Consider a few examples.

[1] This essay was published, in different form, in *Foreign Affairs*, "How America Lost Faith in Expertise," https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-02-13/how-america-lost-faith-expertise. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of the editors.

In 2014, following the Russian invasion of Crimea, the *Washington Post* polled Americans about whether the United States should intervene militarily in Ukraine.[2] Only one in six could identify Ukraine on a map; the median respondent was off by about 1,800 miles. But this lack of knowledge did not stop people from expressing pointed views. In fact, respondents favored intervention in direct proportion to their ignorance. Put another way, the people who thought Ukraine was located in Latin America or Australia were the most enthusiastic about using military force there.

A year later, a liberal polling firm, Public Policy Polling (PPP), asked a broad sample of voters whether they would support bombing Agrabah.[3] PPP was likely trying to flesh out a point about the aggressiveness of conservatives, but the experiment produced some unintended and sad results. Nearly a third of Republican respondents did in fact support bombing Agrabah, versus 13 percent opposed. Democratic preferences were reversed; 36 percent were opposed to 19 percent in favor.

Agrabah doesn't exist. It's the fictional country in the 1992 Disney film *Aladdin*. Liberals crowed that the poll showed Republicans' aggressive tendencies. Conservatives countered that it showed Democrats' reflexive pacifism. Experts in national security couldn't fail to notice that 43 percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Democrats had an actual, defined view on bombing a place in a cartoon.

In early 2017, the *New York Times* ran a graphic showing a map of Eurasia and the Pacific region, covered in pale blue dots. The dots were everywhere: the Caspian Sea, Australia, Siberia. No area was spared a mark. Each of the dots, astoundingly, represented the guess of an American adult about the location of North Korea. Not only were the guesses wildly wrong—with only about a third getting it right—but a fair number of people who managed to put the DPRK on the Korean peninsula blew the 50/50 guess between "north" and "south" and located *North* Korea on the south side of 38th parallel.[4]

Increasingly, incidents like this are the norm rather than the exception. It's not just that people don't know a lot about science or politics or geography. They don't, but that's an old problem. The bigger concern today is that people are unabashed about, even proud of, not knowing things. Americans have reached a point where ignorance, especially about anything related to public policy, is regarded as an actual virtue. To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to demonstrate their independence from nefarious elites—and insulate their increasingly fragile egos from the discomfort of ever being wrong about anything.

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[2] Kyle Dropp, Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, " The less Americans know about Ukraine's location, the more they want U.S. to intervene," *The Washington Post*, Monkey Cage (blog), 7 April 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/07/the-less-americans-know-about-ukraines-location-the-more-they-want-u-s-to-intervene/?utm_term=.49ec6494c574.

[3] Ilya Somin, " Political ignorance and bombing Agrabah," *The Washington Post*, The Volokh Conspiracy (blog), 18 December 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/12/18/political-ignorance-and-bombing-agrabah.

[4] Kevin Quealy, "If Americans Can Find North Korea on a Map, They're More Likely to Prefer Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, The Upshot, 14 May 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/14/upshot/if-americans-can-find-north-korea-on-a-map-theyre-more-likely-to-prefer-diplomacy.html.

I fear, in fact, that we are moving beyond a natural skepticism regarding expert claims to the death of the ideal of expertise itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, teachers and students, knowers and wonderers—in other words, between those with achievement in an area and those with none.

By the death of expertise, I do not mean the death of actual expert abilities, the knowledge of specific things that sets some people apart from others in various areas. There will always be doctors and lawyers and engineers and other specialists. And most sensible people go straight to them if they break a bone or get arrested or need to build a bridge.

But this is a reliance on experts as technicians, the use of established knowledge as an off-the-shelf convenience as desired. Stitch this cut in my leg, but don't lecture me about my diet. (More than two-thirds of Americans are overweight). Help me beat this tax problem, but don't remind me that I should have a will. (Most Americans haven't written one).[5] Keep my country safe, but don't confuse me with details about national security tradeoffs. (Most U.S. citizens have no clue what the government spends or does on most military and security matters).

The larger discussions, ranging from what constitutes a nutritious diet to what actions will best further American national interests, require conversations between ordinary citizens and experts. But increasingly, citizens don't want to have that conversation. Rather, they want to weigh in and have their opinions treated with deep respect, and want their preferences to be chosen not on the strength of their argument or on the evidence they present, but based on their feelings, emotions, and whatever stray information they may have picked up here or there along the way.

This is a very bad thing. A modern society cannot function without a social division of labor. No one is an expert on everything. We prosper because we specialize, developing formal and informal mechanisms and practices that allow us to trust each other in those specializations and gain the collective benefit of our individual expertise. If that trust dissipates, eventually both democracy and expertise will be fatally corrupted, because neither democratic leaders nor their expert advisers want to tangle with an ignorant electorate. At that point, expertise will no longer serve the public interest, but the interest of whatever clique is paying its bills or taking the popular temperature at any given moment. And such an outcome is already perilously near.

Experts and Citizens

Over a half century ago, the political scientist Richard Hofstadter wrote that "the complexity of modern life has steadily whittled away the functions the ordinary citizen can intelligently and competently perform for himself."

> In the original American populistic dream, the omnicompetence of the common man was fundamental and indispensable. It was believed that he could, without much special preparation, pursue the professions and run the government.

[5] Gallup.com, "Majority in U.S. Do Not Have a Will," 18 May 2016.

> Today, he knows that he cannot even make his breakfast without using devices, more or less mysterious to him, which expertise has put at his disposal; and when he sits down to breakfast and looks at his morning newspaper, he reads about a whole range of issues and acknowledges, if he is candid with himself, that he has not acquired competence to judge most of them.

Hofstadter argued that this overwhelming complexity produced feelings of helplessness and anger among a citizenry that knew itself increasingly to be at the mercy of more sophisticated elites. "What used to be a jocular and usually benign ridicule of intellect and formal training has turned into a malign resentment of the intellectual in his capacity as expert," he noted. "Once the intellectual was gently ridiculed because he was not needed; now he is fiercely resented because he is needed too much."[6]

In 2015, the law professor Ilya Somin observed that the problem had persisted and even metastasized over time. The "size and complexity of government," he wrote, have made it "more difficult for voters with limited knowledge to monitor and evaluate the government's many activities. The result is a polity in which the people often cannot exercise their sovereignty responsibly and effectively."[7] Despite decades of advances in education, technology, and life opportunities, voters now are no better able to guide public policy than they were in Hofstadter's day, and in many respects they are even less capable of doing so.

The problem cannot be reduced to politics, class, or geography. Today, campaigns against established knowledge are often led by people who have all the tools they need to know better. For example, the anti-vaccine movement—one of the classic contemporary examples of the phenomenon—has gained its greatest reach among people such as the educated suburbanites in Marin County outside San Francisco.[8] These parents are not medical professionals, but have just enough education to believe they can challenge established medical science, and feel empowered to do so—even at the cost of the health of their own and everybody else's children.

But who are these "experts?"

Experts can be defined loosely as people who have mastered the specialized skills and bodies of knowledge relevant to a particular occupation and who routinely rely on them in their daily work. Put another way, experts are the people who know considerably more about a given subject than the rest of us, and to whom we usually turn for education or advice on that topic. They don't know everything and they're not always right, but they constitute an authoritative minority whose views on a topic are more likely to be right than those of the public at large.

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[6] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 34.

[7] Ilya Somin, "Political Ignorance in America," in Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow, eds., *The State of the American Mind* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2015), 183.

[8] See, for example, Christopher Ingraham, "California's epidemic of vaccine denial, mapped," *The Washington Post*, Wonkblog (blog), 27 January 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/01/27/californias-epidemic-of-vaccine-denial-mapped.

Experts are often wrong, and the good ones among them are the first to admit it—because their own professional disciplines are based on not on some ideal of perfect knowledge and competence, but on a constant process of identifying errors and correcting them that ultimately drives intellectual progress. Yet these days members of the public search for expert errors and revel in finding them not to improve understanding but rather to give themselves license to disregard all expert advice they don't like.

Part of the problem is that some people think they're experts when in fact they're not. We've all been trapped at a party where one of the least-informed people in the room holds court, confidently lecturing the other guests with a cascade of banalities and misinformation. This sort of experience isn't just in your imagination. It's real, something called the Dunning-Kruger Effect, after the research psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. The essence of the effect is that the less skilled or competent you are, the more confident you are that you're actually very good at what you do. The psychologists' central finding: "Not only do [such people] reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it."[9]

The problems for democracy posed by the least-competent are serious. But even competent and highly intelligent people encounter problems in trying to comprehend complicated issues of public policy they are not professionally conversant with—particularly confirmation bias, the tendency to look for information that corroborates what we already believe.

Outside the academy, facts come and go as people find convenient, making arguments unfalsifiable and intellectual progress impossible. And unfortunately, because common sense is not enough to understand or judge plausible alternative policy options, the gap between informed specialists and uninformed generalists often gets filled with crude simplifications or conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are attractive to people who have a hard time making sense of a complicated world and little patience for boring, detailed explanations. They are also a way for people to give context and meaning to events that frighten them. Without a coherent explanation for why terrible things happen to innocent people, they would have to accept such occurrences as nothing more than the random cruelty either of an uncaring universe or an incomprehensible deity.

And just as individuals facing grief and confusion look for meaning where none may exist, so, too, will entire societies gravitate toward outlandish theories when collectively subjected to a terrible national experience. Conspiracy theories and the awed reasoning behind them, as the Canadian writer Jonathan Kay has noted, become especially seductive "in any society that has suffered an epic, collectively felt trauma."[10] This is why they spiked in popularity after World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Kennedy assassination, the 9/11

[9] Justin Kruger and David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77:6 (December 1999), 1121. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.64.2655&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

[10] Jonathan Kay, "Has Internet- Fueled Conspiracy Mongering Crested?," in Mark Bauerline and Adam Bellow, eds., *The State of the American Mind* (West Conshohocken: Templeton, 2015), 138-139.

attacks, and other major disasters—and are growing now in response to destabilizing contemporary trends such as the economic and social dislocations of globalization and persistent random terrorism.

Donald Trump is the most conspiracy-obsessed candidate and president in American history, at least to judge by his public statements. In this, he is almost a perfect reflection of his voters, who feel whipsawed by global changes they do not understand. He has ushered in a new era of foreign policy scapegoating unprecedented in modern American politics, but again, he did not invent the phenomenon: he is, rather, an adept manipulator of a problem already rampant among the low-information voters who constitute his base.

At their worst, conspiracy theories can produce a moral panic in which innocent people get hurt. But even when they seem trivial, their prevalence undermines the sort of reasoned interpersonal discourse on which liberal democracy depends. Why? Because by definition, conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable: experts who contradict the theory demonstrate that they, too, are part of the conspiracy.

The addition of politics, finally, makes things even more complicated. Political beliefs among both laypeople and experts are subject to the same confirmation bias that plagues thinking about other issues more generally. But misguided beliefs about politics and other subjective matters are even harder to shake, because political views are deeply rooted in a person's self-image and most cherished beliefs. Put another way, what we believe says something important about how we see ourselves, making disconfirmation of such beliefs a wrenching process that our minds stubbornly resist.

Let Me Google That For You

Ask an expert about the death of expertise and you will probably get a rant about the influence of the Internet. People who once had to turn to specialists in any given field now plug search terms into a browser and get answers in seconds—so why should they rely on some remote clerisy of snooty eggheads? Information technology, however, is not the primary problem. The digital age has simply accelerated the collapse of communication between experts and laypeople by offering an apparent shortcut to erudition. It allows people to mimic intellectual accomplishment by indulging in an illusion of expertise provided by a limitless supply of facts.

But facts are not the same as knowledge or ability—and on the Internet, they're not even always facts. For all the newfangled laws of Internet usage, the most important may be the pre-digital insight of the science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, whose eponymous rule states that "ninety percent of everything is crap."[11]

There are now more than a billion websites out there. The good news is that even if Sturgeon's cynicism holds, that yields a hundred million pretty good sites—including those of all the reputable publications of the world; the home pages of all the universities, think tanks, research institutions, and NGOs; and vast numbers of other edifying sources of good information.

The bad news, of course, is that to find any of this you have to navigate through a blizzard of useless or misleading garbage posted by everyone from well-intentioned grandmothers to propagandists for the Islamic

[11] See, for instance, Jeff Prucher, ed., *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 224.

State. Some of the smartest people on earth have a significant presence on the Internet. Some of the stupidest people, however, reside just one click away. The countless dumpsters of nonsense parked on the Internet are an expert's nightmare. Ordinary people who already had to make hard choices about getting information from a few dozen newspapers, magazines, and television channels now face endless web pages produced by anyone willing to pay for an online presence.

Of course, this is no more and no less than an updated version of the basic paradox of the printing press. As the writer Nicholas Carr pointed out, the arrival of Gutenberg's invention in the fifteenth century set off a "round of teeth gnashing" among early humanists, who worried that "printed books and broadsheets would undermine religious authority, demean the work of scholars and scribes, and spread sedition and debauchery."[12] The Internet is the printing press at the speed of fiber optics.

The convenience of the Internet is a tremendous boon, but mostly for people already trained in research who have some idea of what they're looking for. It does little good, unfortunately, for a student or an untrained layperson who has never been taught how to judge the provenance of information or the reputability of a writer.

Technological optimists will argue that these objections are just so much old-think, a relic of how things used to be done, and unnecessary now because people can tap in directly to the so-called wisdom of crowds. It is true that sometimes the aggregated judgments of large groups of ordinary people can produce better results than any individual, even a specialist. This is because the aggregation process helps wash out a lot of random misperception, confirmation bias, and the like.

Yet not everything is amenable to the vote of a crowd. Understanding how a virus is transmitted from one human being to another is not the same thing as guessing the weight of a sheep or the number of jelly beans in a jar. As the comedian John Oliver has complained, you don't need to gather opinions on a fact: "You might as well have a poll asking: 'Which number is bigger, 15 or 5?' or 'Do owls exist?' or 'Are there hats?'"[13]

Moreover, the whole point of the wisdom of crowds is that the members of the crowd supposedly have various independent opinions prior to their aggregation. In fact, however, people use the Internet to generate communities of the like-minded, groups dedicated to confirming our preexisting beliefs rather than challenging them. And social media only amplifies this echo chamber, miring millions of Americans in their own political and intellectual biases.

When Experts Fail

Experts fail often, in various ways. The most innocent and most common are what we might think of as the ordinary failures of science. Individuals, or even entire professions, observe a phenomenon or examine a problem, come up with theories and solutions, and then test them. Sometimes they're right, and sometimes

[12] Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic* (July/August 2008).

[13] Katherine Fung, "John Oliver & Bill Nye School Climate Change Skeptics On 'Last Week Tonight'," *Huffington Post*, 13 May 2004.

they're wrong, but the errors are normal and eventually corrected, because intellectual progress includes a lot of blind alleys and wrong turns along the way.

Other forms of expert failure are more worrisome. Experts can go wrong, for example, when they try to stretch their expertise from one area to another. This is less a failure of expertise than a sort of minor fraud—somebody claiming the general mantle of authority even though they're not a real expert in the specific area under discussion—but it is frequent, pernicious, and can undermine the credibility of an entire field. And finally, there is the rarest but most dangerous category: outright deception and malfeasance, in which experts intentionally falsify their results or rent out their professional authority to the highest bidder.

When they do fail, experts must own their mistakes, air them publicly, and show the steps they are taking to correct them. This happens less than it should in the world of public policy, because the standards for judging policy work tend to be more subjective and politicized than the academic norm. Still, for their own credibility, policy professionals should be more transparent, honest, and self-critical about their far-from-perfect track records. Laypeople, for their part, must educate themselves about the difference between normal error and incompetence, corruption, or outright fraud, and cut the professionals some slack regarding the former while insisting on punishment for the latter.

As the philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote, the proper attitude of a layperson toward experts should be a combination of skepticism and humility:

> The skepticism that I advocate amounts only to this: (1) that when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain; (2) that when they are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a non-expert; and (3) that when they all hold that no sufficient grounds for a positive opinion exist, the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment.[14]

Russell noted that 'these propositions may seem mild, yet, if accepted, they would absolutely revolutionize human life'—because the results would challenge so much of what so many people feel most strongly.

Government and Experts

Government and expertise rely upon each other, especially in a democracy. The technological and economic progress that ensures the well-being of a population requires a division of labor, which in turn leads to the creation of professions. Professionalism encourages experts to do their best in serving their clients, respect their own boundaries, and demand their boundaries be respected by others, as part of an overall service to the ultimate client: society itself.

This relationship between experts and citizens rests on a foundation of mutual respect and trust. When that foundation erodes, experts and laypeople become warring factions and democracy itself can become a casualty, decaying into mob rule or elitist technocracy. Awash in gadgets and once-unimaginable conveniences and entertainments, Americans (and many other Westerners) have become almost childlike in their refusal to

[14] Bertrand Russell, *Skeptical Essays* (London: Unwin, 1991), 11-12.

learn enough to govern themselves or to guide the policies that affect their lives. This is a collapse of functional citizenship, and it enables a cascade of other baleful consequences.

In the absence of informed citizens, for example, more knowledgeable administrative and intellectual elites do in fact take over the daily direction of the state and society. The Austrian economist F. A. Hayek wrote in 1960: "The greatest danger to liberty today comes from the men who are most needed and most powerful in modern government, namely, the efficient expert administrators exclusively concerned with what they regard as the public good."[15]

There is a great deal of truth in this. Unelected bureaucrats and policy specialists in many spheres exert tremendous influence on the daily lives of Americans. Today, however, this situation is by default rather than by design. And populism actually reinforces this elitism, because the celebration of ignorance cannot launch communications satellites, negotiate the rights of U.S. citizens overseas, or provide for effective medications. Faced with a public that has no idea how most things work, experts disengage themselves, choosing to speak mostly to each other.

Meanwhile, Americans have increasingly unrealistic expectations of what their political and economic system can provide, and this sense of entitlement fuels continual disappointment and anger. When people are told that ending poverty or preventing terrorism or stimulating economic growth is a lot harder than it looks, they roll their eyes. Unable to comprehend all the complexity around them, they choose instead to comprehend almost none of it and then sullenly blame elites for seizing control of their lives.

Experts can only propose; elected leaders dispose. And politicians are very rarely experts on any of the innumerable subjects that come before them for a decision. By definition, nobody can be simultaneously an expert on China policy and health care and climate change and immigration and taxation—which is why during, say, Congressional hearings on a subject, actual experts are usually brought in to advise the elected laypeople charged with making authoritative decisions.

Sometimes, this partnership between advisers and policymakers fails. Experts get things wrong, and they counsel political leaders to take courses of action that can result in disaster. Critics of the role of expertise point to national traumas like the Vietnam War as one such example. With the benefit of hindsight, these criticisms are often made as though such painful choices could have been avoided by consulting the wisdom of the common citizen.

This call to fall back on the knowledge and virtue of laypeople, however, is romanticized nonsense. Evan Thomas, a journalist and biographer of Richard Nixon, admitted that the "best and the brightest," among them academics like Henry Kissinger and "corporate titans" like Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, "were far from perfect" and that they "bear the blame for Vietnam and the 58,000 American soldiers who died there, not to mention the millions of Vietnamese." But as Thomas points out, those same experts and

[15] Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 378.

elites "strengthened a world order balanced precariously on the edge of nuclear war. They expanded trade, deepened alliances and underwrote billions in foreign aid."[16]

None of these policies would have been popular in and of themselves, but they helped the United States and the West to survive the Cold War and to reach its peaceful end. More important, what kinds of policies would nonexperts or populists have chosen? Thomas challenged readers to "contrast the mistakes of the 1960s to times when Washington allowed foreign policy to be set by public consensus."

> In the 1930s, Congress closed off free trade to protect American industry and listened to voters who wanted a smaller, less costly military with no entangling alliances. The results? The Smoot-Hawley tariff contributed to the Great Depression, and the failure of the League of Nations allowed the rise of fascism and global war.

This illustrates an important point: then as now, Americans tend to think about issues like macroeconomic policy or foreign affairs only when things go wrong. The rest of the time, they remain happily unaware of the policies and processes that function well everyday while the nation goes about its business.

The question nonetheless remains whether America really needs all these experts, especially when their advice becomes so spread out over so many people that no one seems responsible when disaster strikes. Andrew Bacevich, for one, has called for vanquishing the modern expert class, at least in public policy:

> Policy intellectuals—eggheads presuming to instruct the mere mortals who actually run for office— are a blight on the republic. Like some invasive species, they infest present- day Washington, where their presence strangles common sense and has brought to the verge of extinction the simple ability to perceive reality. A benign appearance—well- dressed types testifying before Congress, pontificating in print and on TV, or even filling key positions in the executive branch— belies a malign impact. They are like Asian carp let loose in the Great Lakes.[17]

The irony here is that Bacevich himself is a prolific author, a former senior military officer, and a retired professor who regularly proposes very specific instructions for the same group of mortals. Still, he has a point: in addition to the five or six hundred visible policymakers at the top levels of the US government, there are thousands of experts behind them who may, in fact, not be very good at what they do.

Sometimes, the remedy for expert failure is the time- honored blue-ribbon panel and its recommendations. Sometimes the answer is just to fire somebody. There are many possibilities, including more transparency and competition, in which experts in any field have to maintain a record of their work, come clean about how

[16] Evan Thomas, "Why We Need a Foreign Policy Elite," *The New York Times*, 8 May 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/opinion/why-we-need-a-foreign-policy-elite.html.

[17] Andrew Bacevich, "Rationalizing Lunacy: The Intellectual as Servant of the State," *The Huffington Post*, 8 May 2015.

often they were right or wrong, and actually have journals, universities, and other gatekeepers hold their peers responsible more often for mistakes.

Whether this would work is another matter. The most daunting barrier, however, is the public's own laziness. None of these efforts to track and grade experts will matter very much if ordinary citizens do not care enough to develop even a basic interest in such matters. As Philip Tetlock points out, laypeople are not usually interested in finding experts with excellent track records: they are mostly interested in experts who are accessible without much effort and who already agree with their views. As Tetlock rightly notes, it is not enough to encourage accountability among the "providers of intellectual products" if the "consumers are unmotivated to be discriminating judges of competing claims and counterclaims," and instead approach experts with "the psychology of the sports arena, not the seminar room."[18]

In 1787, Benjamin Franklin was supposedly asked what would emerge from the Constitutional Convention being held in Philadelphia. 'A republic,' Franklin answered, 'if you can keep it.' Americans too easily forget that the form of government under which they live was not designed for mass decisions about complicated issues. Neither, of course, was it designed for rule by a tiny group of technocrats or experts. Rather, it was meant to be the vehicle by which an informed electorate could choose other people to represent them, come up to speed on important questions, and make decisions on the public's behalf.

The workings of such a representative democracy, however, are exponentially more difficult when the electorate is not competent to judge the matters at hand. Laypeople complain about the rule of experts and they demand greater involvement in complicated national questions, but many of them express their anger and make these demands only after abdicating their own important role in the process: namely, to stay informed and politically literate enough to choose representatives who can act wisely on their behalf.

Too few citizens today understand democracy to mean a condition of political equality in which all get the franchise and are equal in the eyes of the law. Rather, they think of it as a state of actual equality, in which every opinion is as good as any other, regardless of the logic or evidentiary base behind it. But that is not how a republic is meant to work, and the sooner American society reestablishes new ground rules for productive engagement between educated elites and the society around them, the better.

Experts need to remember, always, that they are the servants of a democratic society and a republican government. Their citizen masters, however, must equip themselves not just with education, but with the kind of civic virtue that keeps them involved in the running of their own country. Laypeople cannot do without experts, and they must accept this reality without rancor. Experts, likewise, must accept that they get a hearing, not a veto, and that their advice will not always be taken. At this point, the bonds tying the system together are dangerously frayed. Unless some sort of trust and mutual respect can be restored, public discourse will be polluted with unearned respect for unfounded opinions. And in such an environment, anything and everything becomes possible, including the end of democracy and republican government itself.

[18] Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 231-232.

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