



IN THIS ISSUE: THE AMERICAN MIND

Social and cultural trends shape the overall environment in which businesses must exist, compete and plan to thrive. Hence their inclusion in *Growth Strategies*. Besides, I find them quite interesting and profound in their implications, and my instincts tell me my readers do, too.

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1 – STATE OF THE AMERICAN MIND

In the almost 30 years since the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom – a book that drew attention to the deterioration in American culture – the United States has experienced unprecedented increases in wealth, health and technology. Yet the state of American culture seems to have deteriorated further. Traditional American cultural traits such as self-sufficiency, independence and liberty have transmogrified into self-absorption, dependence and the enforcement of “political correctness” (a Soviet Communist invention used to coerce conformity of thought and behavior). Meanwhile, the residing belief in our national motto (*E pluribus unum*) and in the traditional American process of assimilation have been turned inside-out in favor of a misguided multiculturalism, one that accentuates and promotes separateness instead of a shared cultural heritage.

In order to fully grasp the underpinnings of this shift away from the self-reliant, well-informed American, editors Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow assembled a group of cultural and educational experts to describe and explain the root causes of the decline of the American mind. Their book of essays is called [State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Critics on the New Anti-Intellectualism](#).

The book is divided into three sections: Indicators of Intellectual and Cognitive Decline, Personal and Cognitive Habits/Interests, and National

Consequences. A look at the Table of Contents and chapter titles gives a taste of the subject matter:

- America: Are We Losing Our Mind?
- The Knowledge Requirement: What Every American Needs to Know
- The Troubling Trend of Cultural IQ
- Biblical Literacy Matters
- Why Johnny and Joanie Can't Write
- College Graduates: Satisfied, but Adrift
- Anatomy of an Epidemic
- A Wired Nation Tunes Out the News
- Catching Our Eye: The Alluring Fallacy of Knowing at a Glance
- The Rise of the Self and the Decline of Intellectual and Civic Interest
- Has Internet-Fueled Conspiracy-Mongering Crested?
- Dependency in America: American Exceptionalism and the Entitlement State
- Political Ignorance in America
- In Defense of Difficulty: How the Decline of the Ideal of Seriousness Has Dulled Democracy in the Name of a Phony Populism
- We Live in the Age of Feelings
- How Colleges Create the “Expectation of Confirmation”
- The New Antinomian Attitude

Trend Analysis That Builds Business Decisions

In their Foreword the editors describe the traits that form the American posture: independent thought and action, thrift and industriousness, delayed gratification and equal opportunity. The American Mind possesses specific knowledge, too, not just an attitude. You must remember the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Bible, along with stories of the first colonists, the Founding, and the pioneer experience. Religious liberty, grounded in the case of the Pilgrims, must be recognized as central to civic affairs, and economic liberty as well, the freedom to make contracts and act entrepreneurially.

Another root concept is popular sovereignty, they write, which deserves all the solemnity imparted in the assertion “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” The American appreciates the divided structure of government and insists on local control, fearing the consequences of over-centralization and distant masters. However much he despises journalists, he protects a free press and relies on it to monitor elections and politicians. And while the American Mind prizes individualism, it also hails selfless civic virtue, best embodied by George Washington, who stood for the common good and transcended politics.

These are the ingredients of the American Mind and character, the ongoing dismantling of which is both tragedy and travesty. Write the editors:

2 - THE CODDLING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don't like. This is disastrous for education and mental health. So write Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in [The Atlantic](#).

An excerpt:

Something strange is happening at America's colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undi-

“(W)hen we survey the thoughts and habits of the American people today, we find the antithesis of the traditional American Mind and national character emerging again and again. ... Instead of acquiring a richer and fuller knowledge of US history and civics, American students and grown-ups display astounding ignorance of them, and their blindness is matched by their indifference to the problem.

“Civic virtue is a fading trait, our political sphere now typically understood as merely a contest of group interests. Patriotism and the common good are quaint notions. ...

“Instead of upholding basic liberties, more and more Americans accept restrictions on speech, freedom of association, rights to privacy, and religious conscience.

“Taken together, the essays offer a profile of the American Mind in disarray. The profile is not a partial one. The contributors provide enough population data and expert testimony for us to draw this unfortunate inference with confidence. ...

“(W)e do ourselves and our nation no favors when we ignore evidence of debility and withhold criticism. When people fall short of the ideals of their country, they have to be told. The American Mind was an extraordinary creation, and it has to be remembered.”

rected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. ...

In June, a professor protecting himself with a pseudonym wrote an essay for Vox describing how gingerly he now has to teach. “I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me,” the headline said. ...

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Two terms have risen quickly from obscurity into common campus parlance. *Microaggressions* are small actions or word choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent but that are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless. ... *Trigger warnings* are alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response. ...

This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion. During the 2014-15 school year, for instance, the deans and department chairs at the 10 University of California system schools were presented by administrators at faculty leader-training sessions with examples of microaggressions. The list of offensive statements included: “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”

The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into “safe spaces” where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. (T)his movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally. You might call this impulse *vindictive protectiveness*. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse. ...

There’s a saying common in education circles: Don’t teach students what to think; teach them *how* to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them

poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. The harm may be more immediate, too. A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically. ...

WHAT CAN WE DO NOW?

Attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort are bad for the students. They are bad for the workplace, which will be mired in unending litigation if student expectations of safety are carried forward. And they are bad for American democracy, which is already paralyzed by worsening partisanship. When the ideas, values, and speech of the other side are seen not just as wrong but as willfully aggressive toward innocent victims, it is hard to imagine the kind of mutual respect, negotiation, and compromise that are needed to make politics a positive-sum game.

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control.

The biggest single step in the right direction does not involve faculty or university administrators, but rather the federal government, which should release universities from their fear of unreasonable investigation and sanctions by the Department of Education. ...

Universities themselves should try to raise consciousness about the need to balance freedom of speech with the need to make all students feel welcome. Talking openly about such conflicting

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but important values is just the sort of challenging exercise that any diverse but tolerant community must learn to do. Restrictive speech codes should be abandoned. Universities should also officially and strongly discourage trigger warnings. ...

Finally, universities should rethink the skills and values they most want to impart to their incoming students. At present, many freshman-orientation programs try to raise student sensitivity to a nearly impossible level. Teaching students to avoid giving unintentional offense is a worthy

goal, especially when the students come from many different cultural backgrounds. But students should also be taught how to live in a world full of potential offenses.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

[The Suicide of the Liberal Arts](#)

[The Redemption of E.D. Hirsch](#)

[The Cheating Goes On](#)

[A Real History Lesson](#)

3 – SHATTERED CONSENSUS

The United States has been shaped by three sweeping political revolutions: Jefferson's "revolution of 1800," the Civil War, and the New Deal. Each of these upheavals concluded with lasting institutional and cultural adjustments that set the stage for a new phase of political and economic development. Are we on the verge of another upheaval, a "fourth revolution" that will reshape US politics for decades to come? There are signs to suggest that we are, writes James Piereson in [Shattered Consensus](#).

From the publisher's description:

Piereson describes the inevitable political turmoil that will overtake the United States in the next decade as a consequence of economic stagnation, the unsustainable growth of government, and the exhaustion of postwar arrangements that formerly underpinned American prosperity and power. The challenges of public debt, the retirement of the "baby boom" generation, and slow economic growth have reached a point where they require profound changes in the role of government in American life. At the same time, the widening gulf between the two political parties and the entrenched power of interest groups will make it difficult to negotiate the changes needed to renew the system.

Shattered Consensus places this impending upheaval in historical context, reminding readers that Americans have faced and overcome similar trials in the past, in relatively brief but intense periods of political conflict. While others claim that the United States is in decline, Piereson argues that Americans will rise to the challenge of forming a new governing coalition that can guide the nation on a path of dynamism and prosperity.

From the Epilogue:

There are likely to be at least three central elements to the new synthesis that must eventually replace the postwar order: (1) a focus on growth, and the fiscal and regulatory policies required to promote it, as an alternative to the emphasis on redistribution, public spending, and regulation; (2) an emphasis on federalism both to encourage experimentation and innovation in the American system and to remove issues from the national agenda where they contribute to division, stalemate, and endless controversy; and (3) a campaign to depoliticize the public sector by eliminating or strictly regulating public employee unions, so that governments themselves are no longer active in the political process and public workers can once again be viewed as "civil servants" rather than as active agents of one of the political parties.