

# Dumb and Dumber: Are Americans Hostile to Knowledge?

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Published: February 14, 2008

Ms. Pickler threw up both hands and looked at the large blackboard perplexed. “I thought Europe was a country,” she said. Playing it safe, she chose to copy the answer offered by one of the genuine fifth graders: Hungary. “Hungry?” she said, eyes widening in disbelief. “That’s a country? I’ve heard of Turkey. But Hungry? I’ve never heard of it.”

Such, uh, lack of global awareness is the kind of thing that drives [Susan Jacoby](#), author of “The Age of American Unreason,” up a wall. Ms. Jacoby is one of a number of writers with new books that bemoan the state of American culture.

Joining the circle of curmudgeons this season is Eric G. Wilson, whose “Against Happiness” warns that the “American obsession with happiness” could “well lead to a sudden extinction of the creative impulse, that could result in an extermination as horrible as those foreshadowed by [global warming](#) and environmental crisis and nuclear proliferation.”

Then there is Lee Siegel’s “Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob,” which inveighs against the Internet for encouraging solipsism, debased discourse and arrant commercialization. Mr. Siegel, one might remember, was suspended by The New Republic for using a fake online persona in order to trash critics of his blog (“you couldn’t tie Siegel’s shoelaces”) and to praise himself (“brave, brilliant”).

Ms. Jacoby, whose book came out on Tuesday, doesn’t zero in on a particular technology or emotion, but rather on what she feels is a generalized hostility to knowledge. She is well aware that some may tag her a crank. “I expect to get bashed,” said Ms. Jacoby, 62, either as an older person who upbraids the young for plummeting

standards and values, or as a secularist whose defense of scientific rationalism is a way to disparage religion.

Ms. Jacoby, however, is quick to point out that her indictment is not limited by age or ideology. Yes, she knows that eggheads, nerds, bookworms, longhairs, pointy heads, highbrows and know-it-alls have been mocked and dismissed throughout American history. And liberal and conservative writers, from Richard Hofstadter to Allan Bloom, have regularly analyzed the phenomenon and offered advice.

T. J. Jackson Lears, a cultural historian who edits the quarterly review *Raritan*, said, “The tendency to this sort of lamentation is perennial in American history,” adding that in periods “when political problems seem intractable or somehow frozen, there is a turn toward cultural issues.”

But now, Ms. Jacoby said, something different is happening: anti-intellectualism (the attitude that “too much learning can be a dangerous thing”) and anti-rationalism (“the idea that there is no such things as evidence or fact, just opinion”) have fused in a particularly insidious way.

Not only are citizens ignorant about essential scientific, civic and cultural knowledge, she said, but they also don’t think it matters.

She pointed to a 2006 National Geographic poll that found nearly half of 18- to 24-year-olds don’t think it is necessary or important to know where countries in the news are located. So more than three years into the Iraq war, only 23 percent of those with some college could locate Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel on a map.

Ms. Jacoby, dressed in a bright red turtleneck with lipstick to match, was sitting, appropriately, in that temple of knowledge, the [New York Public Library](#)’s majestic Beaux Arts building on Fifth Avenue. The author of seven other books, she was a fellow at the library when she first got the idea for this book back in 2001, on 9/11.

Walking home to her Upper East Side apartment, she said, overwhelmed and confused, she stopped at a bar. As she sipped her bloody mary, she quietly listened to two men, neatly dressed in suits.

For a second she thought they were going to compare that day's horrifying attack to the Japanese bombing in 1941 that blew America into World War II:

"This is just like Pearl Harbor," one of the men said.

The other asked, "What is Pearl Harbor?"

"That was when the Vietnamese dropped bombs in a harbor, and it started the Vietnam War," the first man replied.

At that moment, Ms. Jacoby said, "I decided to write this book."

A popular video on YouTube shows Kellie Pickler, the adorable platinum blonde from "American Idol," appearing on the Fox game show "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" during celebrity week. Selected from a third-grade geography curriculum, the \$25,000 question asked: "Budapest is the capital of what European country?"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juOQhTuzDQ0>