
UNDER COVER

Closing of the American Mind opens some eyes

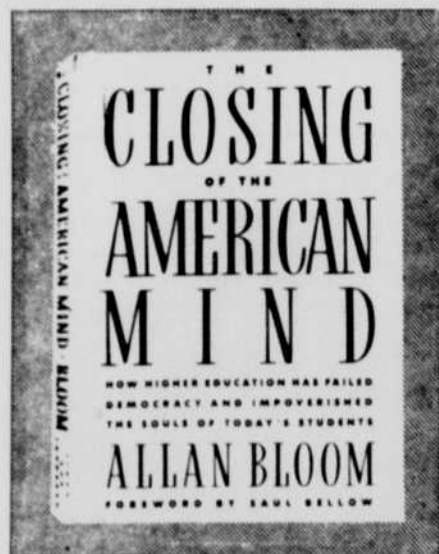
Is America a shining beacon of freedom and justice, a land of shallow lowbrows with no appreciation of culture, or the result of centuries of political liberalization in its classic sense? Allan Bloom, a Professor of Social Philosophy at the University of Chicago, attempts to answer these questions in his recently published book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which reached the bestseller lists this summer.

Bloom's message is that the political and social thought that helped form the idea of the United States also resulted in America's lack of a "contemplative lite." This, in turn, caused the emasculation of both serious thought and higher education. To cure this, Bloom advocates a change in the substance of modern education.

This book is not just another plea for a return to some ill-defined "traditional values." Bloom is an excellent analyst of historical and intellectual development who shows how these matters ultimately affect the daily lives of all. Refusing to speak the diluted language of those who are woefully under-equipped to grasp principles, Bloom quaintly refers to the human animal as *man* and not *person*.

Bloom's first target is relativism. The affinity for the moral gray, instead of the black and white, has long been thought necessary for freedom and democracy. This milquetoast lack of judgment ultimately causes the inability to see freedom and liberal democracy as morally right, and thus, defensible. Soon, the way was paved for those whose political views have no affinity for reason. Bloom supports this contention with the significant observation that students are, in effect, indoctrinated with relativism.

To Bloom, all recent intellectual life is embodied in universities. In fact, the most entertaining parts of the book are his descriptions of current university students and their follies. The images



By Ramon M. Angelucci

Bloom offers of universities delightfully exaggerate the pervasiveness of sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. But, like most caricatures, his description is not far from the truth. Bloom demonstrates that the foremost thought of students is *not* the threat of nuclear war.

One annoying aspect of the book is Bloom's disdain toward fields of study other than those in the social sciences and humanities. He calls graduates in such fields as business "flat specialists." Whether Bloom's opinions in this area reveal an intellectual's indifference toward the idea of productive work, or the professor's loyalty to his department, is not clear. In any case, Bloom's disdain of the production process is certainly no worse than, for example, a sociologist's well-intentioned but comical attempt to study those who actually work for a living.

For the most part, however, Bloom's criticisms of universities are right on the mark. The "general requirements" idea is viewed as incoherent and undisciplined. Bloom knows that this leads students to treat these requirements with contempt and to try to get them out of the way as painlessly as possible. Core

requirements are seen as an obstacle to be surmounted in order to begin the professional, career-specific phase of education. These requirements were created in the aftermath of the sixties, which according to Bloom, was a time of self-destructive metamorphosis for American universities. Bloom also contends that the fifties, in contrast to popular belief, were "one of the great periods of the American university" in terms of scholarship and truly independent thought.

Bloom exposes the university as both the cause and mirror-image of America's intellectual decline, and he has some clear ideas on how to turn things around. According to Bloom, the universities should not concern themselves with providing experiences that students can already get in society, such as vocational training. In short, universities should teach philosophy and the classics. Bloom wants the universities to protect the philosophers from the burden of having to cut it in the materialistic, cutthroat world of bourgeois liberal democracy. Philosophy needs the university to survive, and the university needs philosophy's help to become something more than a giant job training center. Bloom prescribes a "great books" approach, where students would read a series of generally recognized classics. In turn, the university will be a place where students can look forward to more than a chance to go to a professional school, dress outrageously, and attend rock concerts and ballgames.

If we do not relearn the classics and their messages, we will soon have them interpreted for us second-hand by those who wish to dilute or distort them in order to mold our minds. This is the message of Bloom's book, and reading it will point the way to a classical education. If you read anything other than Cliff's Notes or Footnotes, and the highlighted portions of your used texts this term, read *The Closing of the American Mind*. ©