

# AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

restore consumer prosperity through federal expenditures, reinvigoration of credit, social welfare programs, and legislation supportive of workers and organized labor. Yet the statist implications to Roosevelt's programs and the administration's alliance with the unions led modernizing intellectuals like H. L. Mencken and Walter Lippmann to join producer critics and others in condemning the New Deal as inordinately radical, even socialist. Another paradox emerged when Republican adversaries of the Roosevelt administration refashioned populist rhetoric to suit small business and farming interests during World War 2, going so far as to argue that consumer-oriented programs like price controls were elitist.

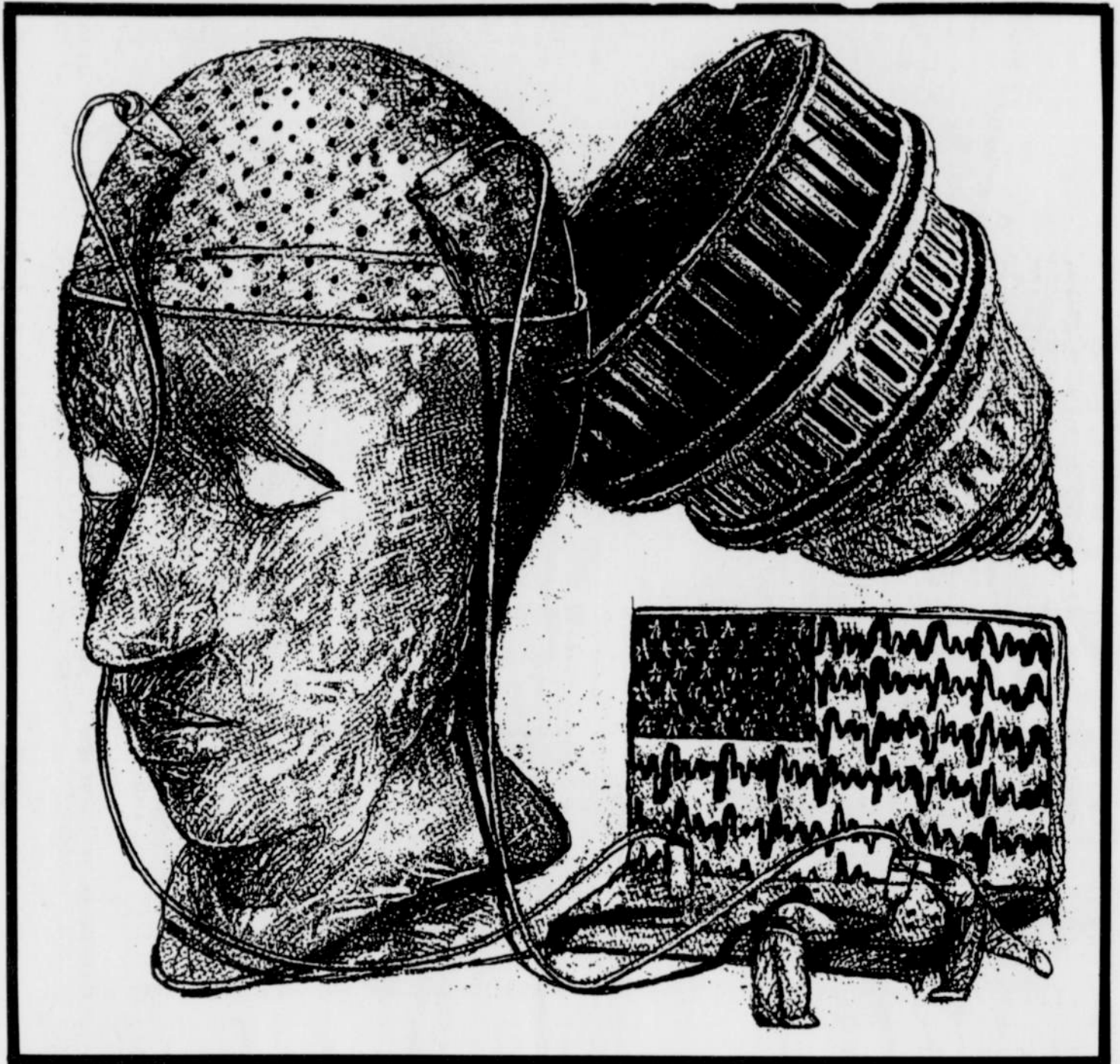
The contradictory response to the guardian class took dramatic form during the Cold War when anticollectivist ideologues alleged that key governmental and cultural figures aspired to build an international Communist workers' state that would elevate intellectuals as a powerful elite. Although assertions over the foreign ties of the political intelligentsia were exaggerated, anxieties over the suspect orientation of policy intellectuals and knowledge professionals resonated deeply with the public. Such concerns resurfaced in the 1960s controversy over federal sponsorship of civil rights. When the quest for racial justice resulted in coercive government mandates such as affirmative action, civil liberties crusaders such as Sam Ervin and Paul Fannin viewed Washington bureaucrats as the problem. The paradoxical nature of race politics emerged when the Nixon administration compensated for an affirmative action alliance with social interventionists by courting organized labor, the former ally of 1930s political intellectuals, and called for moral unity in the Vietnam War against the cultural dissidents of the upper-middle class.

Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush further complicated the political landscape by expropriating the critiques of corporate-funded theorists to espouse a populist conservatism that marginalized rival policy administrators and social specialists as fiscally irresponsible and morally decadent. In an added irony, Bill Clinton sought to avoid the dangers of tax-and-spend liberalism by proposing a health care package that substituted government regulation of the private insurance market for huge Treasury expenditures. Yet distrust of political intellectuals and interventionist policies was so great the Clinton plan suffered a humiliating defeat. Positioning himself as a centrist, the Democratic President nevertheless had to contend with pervasive discomfort with the dissident politics and culture of the 1960s, of which he remained an unlikely but cogent symbol.

Perhaps the greatest contradiction of the century-long campaign against America's political class has been the futility of much of its effort. Critics of social guardians found themselves opposing a host of decent and plausible causes, including scientific teaching in the public schools, improved working conditions for industrial labor, regulation of the stock market and public utilities, cooperative experiments by federal youth agencies, consumer price controls during wartime, assurance of intellectual freedom for academics and foundation-sponsored researchers, adoption of benign public health measures, enactment of civil rights gains and antibias laws, protection of programs to aid the poor, and inclusive efforts to spread equality of opportunity. Furthermore, dangerous portions of anti-intellectual discourse embraced unwarranted hyperbole, unreasoned argument, banal half-truths, crude exaggerations, narrow-minded prejudice, and inelegant conspiratorial thinking. Indeed, the frequent failure of those opposing the guardian class cannot be separated from the cruel excesses associated with such individuals as Father Charles Coughlin, Joseph McCarthy and George Wallace; and such phenomena as the Scopes trial, the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, Depression-era anti-Semitism, antiflouridation paranoia, race supremacy ideology, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the rejectionism of the late-century extreme right.

Even when opponents of the intelligentsia discredited their causes with bigotry, bullying, terror or outright violence, however, challenges to America's 20th-century guardians often touched on central social anxieties. The leading focus of such efforts appeared to be the perceived erosion of fundamental values related to individual autonomy, personal empowerment, family cohesion, religious devotion, community bonding, ethnic allegiance, and national loyalty. Often representing traditional producers and members of the old middle class, critics of the political intelligentsia denounced a social agenda that allegedly encouraged the erasure of human distinctions and the obliteration of cultural differences. They warned that the coercive and manipulative methods of the intellectual classes threatened ordinary citizens with mass depersonalization, powerlessness, and the eradication of vitality and meaning from democratic political life. Concerns of this nature help to explain why professional elites and knowledge and knowledge experts repeatedly have been attacked as agents of modern social and cultural degradation.

For nearly 100 years public discourse in the United States has been marked by a continuing dispute over a broadly defined political class whose members have been castigated as strangers to the American Way. The stranger represented a cultural renegade, a shadowy suspect who assumed a powerful inside position and threatened to use the coercions of social authority and expertise to impose abstract creeds, whether they be statist, collectivist, internationalist or multiculturalist. When socially involved intellectuals embraced admirable causes such as freedom of inquiry, support for organized labor, civil rights



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for racial minorities or antimilitarism, their participation, alleged motives and presumed interests often became the central target of ideological strife and intergroup conflict. Yet their adversaries have been frustrated by the perception that social interventionists and members of the political class often managed to overcome their detractors and perpetuate and expand the bureaucratic networks and careers associated with their ideology and rule.

It may be difficult to ascertain whether service professionals, policy planners and socially oriented intellectuals constitute members of a New Class that monopolizes governance and opinion in modern society. Yet the troubled response to the interventionist intelligentsia in 20th century America illustrates the warning of one scholar that "knowledge and expertise are inherently suspect when they become a basis for claims of political influence." Bureaucrats, planners, experts and social service professionals often have compounded the vulnerabilities of their position with condescending attitudes toward the people they were mandated to serve. As sociologist Alvin Gouldner noted, upper-middle class practitioners tend to assume the world should be governed by people such as themselves — "those possessing superior competence, wisdom and science." Similar concerns marked the criticism of Christopher Lasch, who condemned the insularity of educated professionals and who questioned the tendency of experts and knowledge elites to equate dissent from their self-serving agenda with emotional and cultural backwardness.

Given the legitimacy of such objections and the pointed quality of much of the protests, it nevertheless must be acknowledged that no civilization can thrive without affording an important role for educated experts, knowledge professionals, socially oriented intellectuals, public administrators and human service practitioners. Certainly, if society is to accomplish more than assuring persona profit for the wealth and defending vested economic interests, it must be open to sources of intelligent social change and reform with the hope of improving and elevating the human condition and alleviating the impact of severe social stratification. How, indeed, can important challenges surrounding medical health, psychological well-being, economic welfare, worker safety, the environment and international relations be addressed unless trained and committed practitioners are mobilized to play a role in such endeavors?

If social guardians and members of the political class are to retain the confidence of society, however, their efforts must resonate with broader segments of the public. Although much of the criticism of their role has come from conservatives and antistatists, it is important to recognize the culturally signifi-

cant sources of such discontent. Service intellectuals must succeed in lending their expertise to social problems without necessarily imposing their own needs and sensibilities upon the rest of the citizenry. Knowledge professionals must prove they can play a genuine role in reforms that curb elites, special interests and privileged classes of all kinds, including their own. The sociopolitical sector must demonstrate that it can refashion itself to serve all segments of society instead of the interest groups normally aligned with its agenda. In a nation comprised of individualists as well as participants in common endeavors, the frequently cited goal of cultural pluralism takes on added meaning. Indeed, the requirements of diversity may compel socially committed intellectuals to fuse their own modernizing cultural values with the more traditional ethics of small business, the military, the religious world, ethnic subcultures and other cohesive communities.

Too often, public debate has asked ordinary Americans to choose between reliance on the goodwill of narrowly focused business interests or dependence on the judgment of socially committed intellectuals and reformer immersed in their own worlds. Although knowledge professionals and elements of the political class offer liberation from the crueler consequences of the market, they often appear tainted by self-reflexive concerns and preferences or commitment to favored protégés. Arguably, a healthy democracy needs practitioners who serve all elements of the social structure, not some. Indeed, society cries out for disinterested healers, reformers and authors of consent, not ideological monitors or masters. If there are lessons to be learned from the debates and conflicts, they conceivably rest on the notion that even the brightest among us require a balanced perspective on the effects and legacy of our mutual endeavors. Failure to achieve such vision only can provide comfort to those elements of society whose intentions are far from benevolent.

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We have united to examine the ways in which various economic interests either enhance or harm the health of democracy and we focus on creating basic change.

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