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The Atlantic Monthly | February 2001

Innocent Bystander

Common Stock

Knowing something about everything versus everything about something

by Cullen Murphy

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A few weeks ago emissaries from the game show *Jeopardy!* swept through a quadrant of rural Connecticut, chumming for contestants, and one of my sisters signed up for a quiz. She did pretty well, though she wasn't tendered an invitation. Afterward, at a family gathering, we fielded some of the questions. Hamlet's mother and father? City in South Africa reminiscent of flowers? French word for a newborn's wardrobe? Battle where Cervantes lost the use of his hand? I would like to report that we shouted as one, "Gertrude and Hamlet!" "Bloemfontein!" "Layette!" and "Lepanto!" In truth, we presented a pathetic spectacle of mumbled feints and embarrassed glances.



The moment brought to mind the passage in *My Early Life* (1930) in which Winston Churchill described his encounter with the Latin portion of the entrance examination for Harrow.

I wrote my name at the top of the page. I wrote down the number of the question 'I'. After much reflection I put a bracket round it thus '(I)'. But thereafter I could not think of anything connected with it that was either relevant or true. Incidentally there arrived from nowhere in particular a blot and several

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 - Science & Technology
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Contents | February 2001

In This Issue (Contributors)

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smudges. I gazed for two whole hours at this sad spectacle.

Our poor showing on those *Jeopardy!* questions should probably have come as no surprise. One of the great constants in public commentary is the fretting over how little Americans know about a great many important matters, and how rapidly even that puddle of knowledge seems to be evaporating. Last winter the American Council of Trustees and Alumni released a widely publicized study revealing that some 80 percent of seniors at elite colleges and universities had scored the equivalent of a D or an F on a rudimentary survey of American history. Only 22 percent of the students surveyed knew that the words about government's being "of the people, by the people, for the people" came from the Gettysburg Address. Only 34 percent could identify the American general at Yorktown. On a more positive note, 99 percent correctly identified Beavis and Butthead.

Snapshots like this one are often compared with the bright picture in other countries. Some years ago the National Endowment for the Humanities published a selection of questions from tests administered to university-bound students in France, Germany, England, Wales, and Japan. It's hard to imagine any American senior, except maybe the young Michael Beschloss, relishing an encounter with any of these questions. The French baccalaureate exam asked students to explicate a passage from Kant or write an essay on the (unmistakably French) topic "What does one gain by losing one's illusions?" The British exam for the general certificate of education probed deeply into American history: "'Unbelievably naive' or 'a dogged man of principle': which verdict better characterises the conduct of Woodrow Wilson from 1917 to 1920?" The entrance exam for Tokyo University demanded the following: "Describe the nature of the way the Chinese absorbed Western culture, using the examples of their response to the Jesuit priests between the late Ming and the early Ch'ing dynasties."

Of course, Americans lose face not only when compared with students in other countries but also when compared with Americans of yesteryear. Not long ago, at a beach house, I chanced upon a 1956 edition of the board game [Go to the Head of the Class](#), and discovered that American children of the 1950s—themselves objects of scorn—had it all over their descendants. Players of the game must answer questions correctly in order to advance. "Who was the 'Napoleon of the Stump'—President Tyler, Polk or Pierce?" "Was Lillie Langtry or Lillian Russell known as the 'Jersey Lily'?" "How many seedless apple trees were there in the world in 1905—5, 25, 205, 2,005, or 2,505?" "Birchard was which President's middle name?" "Simone Simon was born where?" The game, advertised as being for people "8 to Adult," is now virtually unplayable.

Evidence of this sort is undeniably sobering—but it tells only part of the story. The fact is, the dwindling amount of knowledge that Americans hold in common seems to be outweighed by an expanding amount of particularized knowledge held by groups of individuals. This counterphenomenon is forcefully brought home by each new edition of *The Yearbook of Experts, Authorities & Spokespersons*, a reference work to which I have developed a mild addiction. A few minutes with the yearbook will change the mind of anyone convinced that America has become the home of the slouch.

Americans have always harbored considerable respect for expert advice (think of Squanto and Lafayette, Dale Carnegie and Dr. Ruth), and the impulse now extends to every last corner of experience. *The Yearbook* has been published annually since 1984, and it seems to have grown fatter with every edition—the 1999 and 2000 volumes each contain upwards of 10,000 citations. This is the work to consult when you need to find the people in America who know everything about something: anger management or managed care, premarital investigations or premenstrual syndrome, cult groups or ethnic groups, needlework or needle exchange, e-business or *E. coli*.

Meet Randall Bell, real-estate consultant and expert on "damage and stigma issues" and "mitigation strategies." (Typical challenge: selling the mansion that belonged to the "Heaven's Gate" cult.) Meet the relationship coach Fran Greene, who has "redefined flirting for the new millennium," and the body-language expert Raymond C. McGraine, who can divulge "the implications of more than 30 handshakes." Here is where to find a law firm specializing in mass disasters ("articulate technical analysis of crashes and accident investigations") and the person responsible for developing Musical Canine Freestyle ("combines the skill of dog obedience with the art of dance").

Some of the specialists offer combinations of talents: "Organizational Psychologist and Harmonica Expert," "psychotherapy and kickboxing." Most are narrowly focused: Armageddon. Bankruptcy. Celibacy. Conspiracy. Dementia. Fat Advocacy. Foreplay. Hasidic Thought. Livestock. Naval Power. Near-Death Experience. Media Gurus. Office Ethics. Organ Procurement. Political Asylum. Subliminal Communication. Telephone Pet Peeves. Terrorism Software. Theatrical Dentistry.

In short, *The Yearbook of Experts, Authorities & Spokespersons* renders the whole of national life into its component parts, each with a cadre of expert custodians. Should this document survive the eons, it will deserve the reverence accorded the Domesday Book.

“I think we agree, the past is over,” George W. Bush declared to reporters last spring. So true. And yet in thinking about the shifting balance between common knowledge and private expertise it may help to recall eighteenth-century England and the process known as enclosure. A rural property system in which people of all classes shared vast swaths of land for many purposes inevitably succumbed to modernization, giving way to a system in which the commons devolved into smaller, privately held parcels devoted to specialized uses. Year after year Parliament carved up additional tracts of countryside, enacting bills “for dividing, allotting, and enclosing the open and common fields.” The once unbroken landscape was soon laced with walls and fences.

Knowledge, of course, is not a zero-sum game—that one person has more doesn't mean that some other person has less. There isn't a Law of Conservation of Knowledge and Ignorance, holding that the amount of knowledge in the world is constant and that as more is funneled into the hands of experts, the amount available to the ordinary person must inevitably decline. Still, relying on experts enables the rest of us to know less about many things, and makes the acquisition of some kinds of knowledge seem pointless or redundant.

Specialization is efficient, and marks our long progression from a hunter-gatherer society to a search-engine society. How far should the balance be allowed to tip? In 1905 the College Entrance Examination Board could take for granted a basic familiarity with geophysical processes. It matter-of-factly asked, “What are the four consequences of the form and rotation of the earth?” A century later ABC News created a spinning globe for its *World News Tonight* that turned in the wrong direction.

The United States will never have a true national curriculum (besides *Jeopardy!*), and there will never again be a generation capable of replying “Polk,” “Lillie Langtry,” “2,005,” “Rutherford B. Hayes's,” and “Marseilles” to those questions from *Go to the Head of the Class*. But it probably makes sense to designate a dozen or so things that every American should know. I'm hardly an expert, but my short list would include: the difference between Theodore and Franklin, and between Joe and Eugene; the significance of Booth, Guiteau, Czolgosz, and Oswald; the meaning of the term “tax event”; the price of gasoline in other industrialized countries; the infield-fly rule; how to tell time on a nondigital watch; the custom that people be allowed off an elevator before others get on; the convention that when walking you keep to the right; the fact that a dozen specimens of a single species don't count as one item for Express Lane purposes; and the fact that the now universal linguistic trope “No problem” is not synonymous with “You're welcome.”

It's a start, anyway. In this age of compartmentalization, I guess everyone should also know the phone number for tech support.

What do you think? Discuss this article in **Post & Riposte**.

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The Atlantic Monthly; February 2001; Common Stock - 01.02; Volume 287, No. 2; page 22-24.

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