

Ignorance in America.

By [John Kozy](#)

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Ignorance is pervasive in America; it affects the rich as well as the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the famous as well as the obscure. It's prevalent in the suites of our nation's CEOs, the Congress, the military, and even our universities. It defines this nation.

Christiane Amanpour, one of CNN's stellar correspondents, presented a special in August 2008 titled *God's Muslim Warriors*. It mentioned Syyid Qutb's 1964 book, *Milestones*, which, she claims, "advocated violent jihad, even against Muslim governments" and inspired generations of Muslim radicals and the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood. She describes *Milestones* as "a moral indictment of America."

Qutb, she says, "came to America in 1948 to study. But American culture shocked the scholarly Muslim poet and critic." She appears to quote (the transcript doesn't make this clear) Syed Qutb asking, "This great America, what is it worth in the scale of human values? I wish I could find somebody to talk with about human affairs, morality and spirit, not just dollars, movie stars and cars." She quotes a person named Azzam saying, "He [Qutb] used to express in some of his letters about his feelings that the American society is losing its soul because of its materialism. He said that's all they think about." She says, "Qutb wrote that Islamic values are the cure for spiritual emptiness. He urged Muslims to purge the world of Western influence, if necessary, by force."

She interviewed Fawaz Gerges, a Lebanese born Christian, who holds the Christian A. Johnson Chair in International Affairs and Middle Eastern Studies at Sarah Lawrence College, who says, "Qutb resented the deep philosophical secular roots of American society. He resented the way women and men interact in society. He resented the obsessive nature of America materialism. He believed that America lacks ritualism." He describes Qutb as "a man who found the country to be a spiritual wasteland," and says Qutb's "views of America are terrifying . . . because they're narrow. They present America in very simplistic dichotomies."

But Ms Amanpour makes it appear as though Qutb wrote a book that contained merely two sentences: "America and the Western world have a moral problem because they look at the human being only from a materialistic point of view"—a statement that many Americans would agree with—and "Islamic values are the cure for spiritual emptiness." How those two sentences could have inspired a jihadist movement and the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood is difficult to discern. Ms Amanpour tells us what happened because of the publication of *Milestones* but by reducing the book's content to two sound-bite sentences, she leaves us completely ignorant of why happened. Such cavalier treatment of *Milestones* is a symptom of the value placed on books by Americans, and I recently realized just how curious the status of books in American society is.

Having passed the midpoint in my seventieth year of life, my wife and I decided that it was time to downsize, so we started looking at smaller houses. Over those seventy plus years, I had accumulated an extensive library—more than two, perhaps more than three, thousand volumes. So as we looked at houses, my eye always looked for places where books could be shelved. But not one house we were shown had been designed to accommodate the shelving of books. Apparently American architects, developers, and builders do not consider books to be something they need to make accommodations for in American homes. Their houses have kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, dining rooms, family rooms, entertainment and game rooms, but no book rooms, making it clear that books are not an integral part of American culture.

Books, however, are repositories of knowledge. People become educated by reading books. If homes lack books, the means to education are lacking. If a child finds that books are not valued in his home, why would he value them in school? If reading is not encouraged at home, how can teachers convince students of the usefulness of reading? If his family believes that what they learn from watching television is enough, why would any child believe differently? And the nation's dropout rate provides strong anecdotal evidence that learning is not important to many Americans.

America has never been very good at educating its people. (Athletes receive scholarships; scholars do not.) Of yes, America has its marvelous, prestigious universities, but they don't produce highly educated Americans. Most advanced degrees awarded by U.S. universities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics go to foreign nationals.

[\[http://www.uschamber.com/international/agenda/immigration_policies.htm\]](http://www.uschamber.com/international/agenda/immigration_policies.htm).

Our controversial reliance on H1B visas is well known. America takes credit for building the atomic bomb, but much of the science was developed in Europe and many of the scientists involved were Europeans who were educated there. The president, in his "Yes, we can!" oratory says "We put a man on the moon in ten years." Yes, we did, but not without help from German scientists and engineers who many believe should have been tried as war criminals in Nuremburg at the end of World War II. The English built the first modern computer (secretly) and invented radar. A German designed the first operational turbojet engine. American colleges and universities do not graduate enough schoolteachers, nurses, or primary care physicians (many of which we now import from that intellectual giant named India). Even our nation's financiers relied on a Chinese mathematician's theorem to evaluate risk. (I have never heard anyone say that we lack enough MBAs.) When the nation's financiers decided to use David X. Li's Gaussian copula function to assess risk, they led the world down a road to perdition. Li himself said of his own model: "The most dangerous part is when people believe everything coming out of it." Such belief results from mathematical ignorance.

Although we have educated a few very well, we have not made education an integral part of our society. Not only have we taken to importing the products we sell, we have for decades imported the brains we use. Now we have even been reduced to having to import our own money. We have almost become an entirely dependent nation.

The American educational system won't be improved by producing more teachers, building more classrooms to reduce class size, or creating programs such as head start and no child left behind. It can only be improved by a fundamental change in our cultural values.

Imagine what American athletics would be like if bats and balls of all types and the

broadcast of athletic events were as rare in American homes as books. Americans need to recognize that no nation was ever made great by its entertainers, athletes, and shopkeepers; yet a nation of entertainers, athletes, and shopkeepers is what America has become. None of these is an intellectual pursuit.

America's ruling oligarchs may believe that the public can be kept ignorant while they and their children can be learned, but they're wrong. Ignorance is pervasive; it affects the rich as well as the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the famous as well as the obscure. It's prevalent in the suites of our nation's CEOs, the Congress, the military, and even our universities. It defines this nation.

How anyone can believe that America can continue to prosper in this state of ignorant dependency is a conundrum of Gordian-knot proportions. I believe it was Dean Baker (sorry, I lost the reference) who wrote, "We need to remember what happened to the British Empire. Having originated with the overseas colonies and trading posts established by England in the 17th century, by 1922, it held sway over one-quarter of the world's population on whom 'the sun never set.' Yet by 1914 it had become a 'nation of shopkeepers' which could not then nor again in 1939 defend itself against much smaller Continental powers." Those in power in America are ignorant of history, too.

John Kozy is a retired professor of philosophy and logic who blogs on social, political, and economic issues. After serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he spent 20 years as a university professor and another 20 years working as a writer. He has published a textbook in formal logic commercially, in academic journals and a small number of commercial magazines, and has written a number of guest editorials for newspapers. His on-line pieces can be found on <http://www.jkozy.com/> and he can be emailed from that site's homepage.

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