



Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free

By Charles P. Pierce

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The three Great Premises of Idiot America:

- Any theory is valid if it sells books, soaks up ratings, or otherwise moves units
- Anything can be true if someone says it loudly enough
- Fact is that which enough people believe. Truth is determined by how fervently they believe it

With his trademark wit and insight, veteran journalist Charles Pierce delivers a gut-wrenching, side-splitting lament about the glorification of ignorance in the United States.

Pierce asks how a country founded on intellectual curiosity has somehow deteriorated into a nation of simpletons more apt to vote for an *American Idol* contestant than a presidential candidate. But his thunderous denunciation is also a secret call to action, as he hopes that somehow, being intelligent will stop being a stigma, and that pinheads will once again be pitied, not celebrated. Erudite and razor-sharp, *Idiot America* is at once an invigorating history lesson, a cutting cultural critique, and a bullish appeal to our smarter selves.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Book Description

The Culture Wars Are Over and the Idiots Have Won.

A veteran journalist's acidically funny, righteously angry lament about the glorification of ignorance in the United States.

In the midst of a career-long quest to separate the smart from the pap, Charles Pierce had a defining moment at the Creation Museum in Kentucky, where he observed a dinosaur. Wearing a saddle... But worse than this was when the proprietor exclaimed to a cheering crowd, "We are taking the dinosaurs back from the evolutionists!" He knew then and there it was time to try and salvage the Land of the Enlightened, buried somewhere in this new Home of the Uninformed.

With his razor-sharp wit and erudite reasoning, Pierce delivers a gut-wrenching, side-splitting lament about the glorification of ignorance in the United States, and how a country founded on intellectual curiosity has somehow deteriorated into a nation of simpletons more apt to vote for an American Idol contestant than a presidential candidate.

With *Idiot America*, Pierce's thunderous denunciation is also a secret call to action, as he hopes that somehow, being intelligent will stop being a stigma, and that pinheads will once again be pitied, not celebrated.

A Q&A with Charles P. Pierce

Question: What inspired, or should I say drove, you to write *Idiot America*?



Charles P. Pierce: The germ of the idea came as I watched the extended coverage of the death of Terri Schiavo. I wondered how so many people could ally themselves with so much foolishness despite the fact that it was doing them no perceptible good, politically or otherwise. And it looked like the national media simply could not help itself but be swept along. This started me thinking and, when I read a clip in the *New York Times* about the Creation Museum, I pitched an idea to Mark Warren, my editor at *Esquire*, that said simply, "Dinosaurs with saddles." What we determined the theme of the eventual piece—and of the book—would be was "The Consequences Of Believing Nonsense."

Question: You visited the Creation Museum while writing *Idiot America*. Describe your experience there. What was your first thought when you saw a dinosaur with a saddle on its back?

Charles P. Pierce: My first thought was that it was hilarious. My second thought was that I was the only person in the place who thought it was, which made me both angry and a little melancholy. Outside of the fact that its "science" is a god-awful parodic stew of paleontology, geology, and epistemology, all of them wholly detached from the actual intellectual method of each of them. The most disappointing thing is that the completed museum is so dreadfully grim and earnest and boring. It even makes dragon myths servant to its fringe biblical interpretations. Who wants to live in a world where dragons are boring?

Question: Is there a specific turning point where, as a country, we moved away from prizing experience to trusting the gut over intellect?

Charles P. Pierce: I don't know if there's one point that you can point to and say, "This is when it

happened.” The conflict between intellectual expertise and reflexive emotion—often characterized as “good old common sense,” when it is neither common nor sense—has been endemic to American culture and politics since the beginning. I do think that my profession, journalism, went off the tracks when it accepted as axiomatic the notion that “Perception is reality.” No. Perception is perception and reality is reality, and if the former doesn't conform to the latter, then it's the journalist's job to hammer and hammer the reality until the perception conforms to it. That's how “intelligent design” gets treated as “science” simply because a lot of people believe in it.

Question: You delve into Ignatius Donnelly's life story. In 1880, he published the book *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* in an attempt to prove that the lost city existed. Yet, you characterize Donnelly as a lovable crank, and don't take issue with him as you do with modern eccentrics, like Rush Limbaugh. What's the difference between a harmless crank and a crank in *Idiot America*?

Charles P. Pierce: Cranks are noble because cranks are independent. Cranks do not care if their ideas succeed—they'd like them to do so—but cranks stand apart. Their value comes when, occasionally, their lonely dissents from the commonplace affect the culture, at which point either the culture moves to adopt them and their ideas come to influence the culture. The American crank is not someone with 600 radio stations spewing bilious canards to an audience of “dittoheads.” The concept of a “dittohead” is anathema to the American crank. He is a freethinker addressing an audience of them, whether that audience is made up of one person or a thousand. A charlatan is a crank who sells out.

Question: What is the most dangerous aspect of Idiot America?

Charles P. Pierce: The most dangerous aspect of Idiot America is that it encourages us to abandon our birthright to be informed citizens of a self-governing republic. America cannot function on automatic pilot, and, too often, we don't notice that it has been until the damage has already been done.

Question: Is there a voice or leader of Idiot America?

Charles P. Pierce: The leaders of Idiot America are those people who abandoned their obligations to the above. There are lots of people making an awful lot of money selling their ideas and their wares to Idiot America. Idiot America is an act of collective will, a product of lassitude and sloth.

Question: What is the difference between stupidity and glorifying ignorance?

Charles P. Pierce: Stupidity is as stupidity does, to quote a uniquely stupid movie. It has been with us always and always will be. But we moved into an era in which stupidity was celebrated if it managed to sell itself well, if it succeeded, if it made people money. That is “glorifying ignorance.” We moved into an era in which the reflexive instincts of the Gut were celebrated at the expense of reasoned, informed opinion. To this day, we have a political party—the Republicans—who, because it embraced a “movement of Conservatism” that celebrated anti-intellectualism is now incapable of conducting itself in any other way. That has profound political and cultural consequences, and the truly foul part about it was that so many people engaged in it knowing full well they were peddling poison.

Question: While writing *Idiot America*, what story or incident made you the most incensed?

Charles P. Pierce: Without question, it was talking to the people at Woodside Hospice, who shared with me what it was like to be inside the whirlwind stirred up by people who used the prolonged death of Terri Schiavo as a political and social volleyball to advance their own unpopular and reckless agenda. There are people—Sean Hannity comes to mind—who, if there is a just god in heaven, should be locked in a room for 20 minutes with Annie Santa Maria, the indomitable woman who works with the patients at the hospice. Only one of them would come out, and it wouldn't be him.

Question: With the election of President Obama, is Idiot America coming to an end? Or, will there always be a place for idiocy in America?

Charles P. Pierce: Look at the political opposition to President Obama. “Socialist!” “Fascist!” “Coming to get your guns.” Hysteria from the hucksters of Idiot America is still at high-tide. People are killing other people and specifically attributing their action to imaginary oppression stoked by radio talk-show stars and television pundits. That Glenn Beck has achieved the prominence he has makes me wonder if there is a just god in heaven.

Question: Are there any positive signs that we are moving away from Idiot America? If you could create a twelve step program to America back on track, what would be your first suggestion?

Charles P. Pierce: Remember that perception is not reality, that opinion, no matter how widely held, is not fact. An old and wise friend of mine said that the only question that any American citizen is required to answer is “Do you govern or are you governed?” It has to be answered in the former, and that answer has to be continuous. We have to get back to that.

(Photo © Brendan Doris Pierce, 2008)

From Publishers Weekly

Journalist Pierce delivers a rapier-sharp rant on how the America of Franklin and Edison, Fulton and Ford has devolved into America the Uninformed, where citizens hostile to science are exchanging fact for fiction, and faith for reason, and glutting themselves on reality TV and conspiracy theories. Pierce makes no apologies for his liberal bias, and some conservatives—notably evolution opponents and Rush Limbaugh—endure a good deal of bashing. Pierce writes that in the U.S., Fact is merely what enough people believe, and truth lies only in how fervently they believe it. He supports his thesis with references to James Madison and other founding fathers, who may have foreseen and rued the emergence of cranks who would threaten the Enlightenment-based nation they were shaping. Although the book is not likely to win any converts from the right wing Pierce so energetically decries, it is an engaging catalogue of those unscientifically verified truths that enthrall and impassion millions of Americans. (*June*)
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Review

“A raucous rant against the armies of the right. . . . Pierce is at his scathing, insightful best.”
—*The Boston Globe*

“A lively and, dare I say, intelligent study of the ongoing assault on gray matter.”
—Stephen Amidon, *The New York Observer*

“[A] witty and pointed indictment of our nation’s disturbing ability to vilify smart people and elevate chowderheads to positions of power and influence.”
—*The Salt Lake Tribune*

“For a good (if painful) laugh about creationism and other bits of American lunacy, try Charles Pierce’s *Idiot America*. It’s a funny, sly version of an argument made recently by Al Gore in *The Assault on Reason*, and by the brilliant Susan Jacoby in *The Age of American Unreason*.”
—John A. Farrell, USNews.com

“There is only one Charles Pierce, and while that may be a good thing, it is also a damn good thing we have his unique combination of gonzo, erudition, fearlessness, and eloquence to help us make sense of a senseless world. I stand in awe, and appreciation.”
—Eric Alterman, author *Why We’re Liberals* and *When Presidents Lie*

“Pierce penetrates, and the world feels less idiotic already.”

—Roy Blount Jr., author of *Alphabet Juice* and *Long Time Leaving*

“Charles Pierce takes us on a brilliant and hilarious tour of the back roads of American idiotocracy through history—skewering Atlantis-seekers, evolution deniers, jackasses, nincompoops, and right-wing know-it-alls with his trademark sledgehammer wit. Reading Pierce’s *Idiot America*, I laughed myself stupid.”

—Amy Dickinson, author of *The Mighty Queens of Freeville*

“Engaging. . . . Pierce delivers a rapier-sharp rant on how the America of Franklin and Edison, Fulton and Ford has devolved into America the Uninformed.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“There’s a guy down at the end of the bar who’s furiously angry, hilariously funny, and has an Irish poet’s talent for language. He’s been traveling the country, and he’s been alternately appalled and moved by what he’s found there, and, lucky you, he wants to tell you all about it. Listen.”

—Peter Sagal, author of *The Book of Vice* and host of NPR’s *Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Betty Epperson:

Why don't make it to become your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important take action, like looking for your favorite reserve and reading a book. Beside you can solve your long lasting problem; you can add your knowledge by the e-book entitled *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free*. Try to make the book *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free* as your friend. It means that it can for being your friend when you feel alone and beside that of course make you smarter than before. Yeah, it is very fortunated for you. The book makes you considerably more confidence because you can know everything by the book. So , we should make new experience in addition to knowledge with this book.

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