

Concerned about future of U.S.? Check out 'Idiot'

Never before has a nation so dedicated itself to the proposition that not only should people hold nutty ideas, but they should cultivate them, treasure them, shine them up, and put them right up there on the mantelpiece."

So writes Charles Pierce in his new bestseller, "Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free."

"In the new media age, everybody is a historian, or a scientist, or a preacher, or a sage," Pierce continues. "And if everyone is an expert, then nobody is, and the worst thing you can be in a society where everybody is an expert is, well, an actual expert."

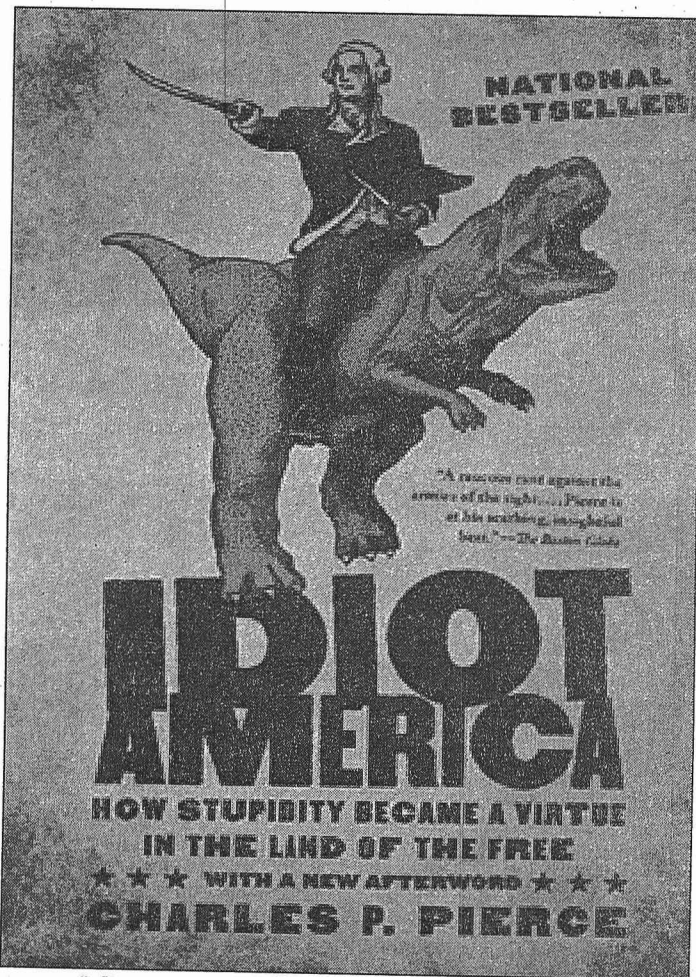
Pierce is a staff writer for The Boston Globe Magazine as well as a contributor to Esquire and several other well-respected publications. He has a degree in journalism from Marquette University and can be heard regularly on National Public Radio. His previous books include "Sports Guy, Hard to Forget: An Alzheimer's Story," and "Moving the Chains: Tom Brady and the Pursuit of Everything."

In case you are wondering, this is not one of those books that delves into the reasons our kids are falling behind the rest of the world in math and science or why most high school students don't know basic history. While Pierce acknowledges that we have reason to be concerned about these issues, he sees them as merely symptomatic of a larger anti-intellectual shift in our culture that is rooted in a fundamental and pervasive mistrust of almost everything and everybody.

Central to his thesis is the assertion that, contrary to popular belief, some people actually do know more than others, and this is particularly true when it comes to critical areas such as science and medicine. Access to almost unlimited information via the Internet has helped create a society where ordinary citizens seem to think they can — with minimal time and effort — understand as much about highly specialized and complex subjects as those who have devoted their careers to studying those subjects. Pierce argues not only is this sheer nonsense, it is dangerous and threatens our entire way of life.

Take global warming as a prime example. Pierce notes that the evidence to support this phenomenon is overwhelming and unequivocal. "That global warming is taking place has been the consensus within the community studying the phenomenon at least since the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report in 1995," Pierce writes.

So what about the report issued by Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe in 2007 that "debunked" the "myth" of global warming? The Inhofe report claimed that it was the "opinion" of more than 400 "scientists" that the legitimacy of global warming had not been conclusively established. Never mind



"Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free," by Charles P. Pierce. New York: Anchor Books, 2010, 308 pages, \$15.95.

that these 400 "scientists" included local television weathermen, economists and an odd assortment of other "experts" who had probably never even glanced at a reputable book on climatology.

"Actual relevant expertise did not matter," Pierce observes.

He also sees many similarities between the current global warming "debate" and the "debate" a half a century ago over whether smoking causes cancer. In both cases, according to Pierce, those who did not understand the underlying science, or did not agree with it, manufactured the illusion that what they wanted to believe — for economic or political reasons — was somehow just as valid as the explanations offered by the scientists who had engaged in systematic and credible studies of the respective issues for most of their lives.

"If we have abdicated our birthright to scientific progress, we have done so by moving the debate into the realm of political and cultural argument, where we all feel more confident," Pierce explains. "Held to the standards of that context, any scientific theory is turned into mere opinion."

But science is not subject to political and economic constraints or implications. Without an undeterred and unconstrained pursuit of genuine knowledge, human progress will eventually come to a standstill and the whole system will fall apart.

In chapter nine, Pierce provides one of his more interesting and powerful analogies. Using the

invention of the automatic pilot in 1912 as a metaphor, he explains how, in recent decades, our government has drifted away from the principles on which this country was established.

"The country was founded by people who considered self-government no less a science than botany," Pierce asserts. "It required an informed and educated and enlightened populace, or else all the delicate mechanisms of the system would come apart. The founders provided no mechanism for a government to run on automatic pilot."

Pierce lays most of the blame for the current state of affairs on average Americans who have lost the desire as well as the patience needed to make sense of an increasingly complex world. If an idea cannot be fully explained in a single paragraph or completely captured in a succinct soundbite, we either become suspicious or simply lose interest.

I highly recommend "Idiot America" to anyone who is concerned about our future and the anti-intellectual course we seem to be pursuing. But be forewarned. If you disagree with Pierce — and there is a good chance you might at several points throughout the text — be prepared to defend yourself with solid evidence.

Pierce does not suffer fools lightly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.