

The Ivory Tower and the Oil Pit: A Parable?

by William L. Howard

After the Ivory Tower Falls: How College Broke the American Dream and Blew up Our Politics—And How to Fix It, Will Bunch, William Morrow/HarperCollins, 2022, pp. 312, \$29 hardcover.

This book is for the credulous many already persuaded of its contentions. It will appeal to journalists, activists, “never Trumpers,” and a few academics who might appreciate journalism that reinforces their social predilections. The reader looking for something more substantive will soon tire of familiar prejudices and talking points. That its political bias was largely inculcated by means of a college education is a more conclusive sign of the ivory tower’s fall than the problems identified in the book: an indicator of a calamity in a country that rose and succeeded partly by virtue of a clear-eyed search for truth aided by a superior system of higher education. As for the problematic nexus between higher education and politics identified in the title, the book offers an incomplete and incoherent argument. It examines neither the contributions colleges and univer-

sities have made to the student indebtedness crisis nor their role in educating the purveyors of a stupefying political discourse.

The book ultimately proposes that the spirit of expansion that propelled American society after World War II be reignited through government action. First, Washington D.C. must subsidize higher education at higher levels. Second, it should organize a year of national service rather than “simply throwing our young people to the harsh whims of a privatized society.” Getting a college education without burdensome debt would improve a graduate’s economic prospects. National service would not only give a sense of purpose to the purposeless but also create a national unity lacking in a politically divided country.

Although it will likely pass as objective investigative journalism in media outlets, the book reads at first like

a compendium of the progressive left's nightmares about MAGA America. It begins in Knox County, Ohio, home to Kenyon College. Author Will Bunch, Brown graduate and reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, portrays townsfolk as yokels clinging to their guns, Bibles, and bigotry. Even local businesses come in for pummeling. The largest employer (and charitable giver) in an otherwise depressed area is suspect for having benefitted from Donald Trump's tax cuts. Bunch's impressions of the communities surrounding the college form a kind of morality tale side-show: lurid clouds of corruption and prejudice surround the locals while the college is a clearing of enlightened reason and camaraderie.

I have visited Kenyon, and it might well be Arcadia. Located in the rolling hills and green corn fields of central Ohio, it is an idyllic small college with a 200-year history. Tuition and fees this academic year are \$83,000. Bunch admits that it is not, nor would it claim to be, a prototypical college. Neither is it described as a falling ivory tower or a breaker of the American Dream (although had he mentioned it, the tuition might have lent credence to that argument); nor does he accuse it of promoting meritocracy, the villain of this piece, although it would seem to epitomize it. So why mention Kenyon at all?

Because Bunch uncovers evidence that it was the victim of excessive local law enforcement. The profiling of black students, the ticketing of a university golf cart filled with celebratory students driving on a sidewalk, and a police of-

ficer's macing of students involved in an out-of-control snowball fight after being called by overwhelmed campus security portray a besieged campus. As the dustcover sensationally proclaims, Kenyon is "a tiny speck of Democratic blue amidst the vast red swath of white, postindustrial, rural midwestern America"; "a world-class institution [that] caters to elite students amidst a sea of economic despair." Although cleverly devised, this picture does not lead to a cause-and-effect analysis of exactly how this college and others like it exemplify the decline of higher education. In this parable, Kenyon represents a small, blue beacon of hope shining above hopeless, red-stained Knox County, where Bunch dramatically describes himself as "embedded," apparently visualizing himself in a war zone.

As he conducts an interview with one of the more enlightened members of the community—someone like himself who grew up in Westchester County, New York—he observes a "massive" pickup truck with a "massive" Trump/Pence flag cruising the square. (He might have written "menacingly" but did not need to. A dog whistle does not require adverbs.) Invited to a prayer service at a local automobile garage by the owner, Bunch portrays the "minister," wearing a trucker cap, speaking of the God of the Old Testament, while "the faithful—ringing the long pit where the mechanics dumped out their oil or other fluids working on old cars during the day—nodded their heads and grunted in assent." The word "deplorables" springs to

mind. (I encountered similar journalistic set-ups when I researched state newspaper articles from the time of the 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi. In the political climate of that time, the word evoked but left unstated by the elitist press was “n---rs.”) Bunch translates the minister’s “shorthand”: “God can’t be endlessly forgiving and endlessly loving no matter what the pro-tolerance, pro-sodomy crowd up the hill in places like Gambier or out there in New York or California wants to believe.” Later, the garage owner reveals, again via the author’s inimitable paraphrasing, that he “accepted Donald Trump into his life a couple of decades after doing the same to Jesus Christ, initially to ward off the bottle.” When the owner complains about the Deep State, child trafficking, Marxism, and socialism, Bunch summarizes: “It sounded very much like the bat-guano-crazy QAnon conspiracy theory, but [he] insisted to me that he wasn’t a follower of that.” Coming from an alcoholic family and having overcome his own alcoholism through the help of his pastor, the repair shop owner may have had an admirable life story, but he was a “pro-Trump spewer of vitriol toward LGBTQ+ people.” He is apparently so unsavory that an enlightened investigative reporter and his readers need not trouble themselves any further with him. He and those like him “drowned in their own ignorance.”

Exactly how either Kenyon or surrounding red Ohio relates to the subject of this book is left hazy. Bunch hints of a deep divide between Kenyon and the

community in which it resides, but his analysis is superficial. He assumes that there are resentments between college and town and that they are based on the red town’s class envy and other ingrained prejudices. What is taught in the blue classrooms is never investigated. If consistent with other elite universities (and the media that Bunch represents), then its students might well have deduced based on the fashionable social theories of some of its professors and most of its activists that the citizens of Knox County represent all that is wrong with America. White, middle-to-lower class, with Trump signs in their yards and (at least) one Confederate flag in a pickup truck window: what would, or more precisely, *should*, an aspiring, cosmopolitan college student make of these folk? What would classmates and professors *expect* him or her to conclude, one wonders?

Money seems to be part of the ivory tower collapse and the political divide. The book calls attention to the student debt crisis. However, it never details Kenyon’s (or any other college’s) tuition and fees. Are they reasonable? Extravagant? What is the ratio of in-state, out-of-state, and foreign students? What proportion of tuition money is allocated to undergraduate education? Does the school provide reasonable compensation to the faculty, good education for the students, and fair value for their families? Has it, like many colleges, unconscionably re-allocated increasing amounts of money from instruction to administration?

Instead, Bunch deplors the fact that the government has not made college education free. The COVID-induced financial crunch caused the Kenyon administration to cut work-study pay resulting in a student employee strike. If this adversity made the students more sympathetic to the underemployed in the county surrounding them, however, we are not told. Their financial pain was an opportunity to practice safe academic activism. The twenty-two-year-old who took to the megaphone to lead the strike, initially a physics major, was transformed by his sensitivity to injustice into a political science major and recruiter of student activists. Earlier in his academic career, he had led a protest against the county for cooperating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and “dodged tear gas canisters” in a Black Lives Matter riot in Cleveland. His “savvy answer” when asked why he and other students did not work to transform the county around them was that Ohioans thought them “uppity” and stigmatized them; thus, the smart solution for him and like-minded students was to side-step the community they were guests in, join the Democratic Socialists, return to the elite enclaves from which they originated, and change the world—including Knox County—from the same position of power they had come from. Superficially exposed to financial hardship and social problems, and about to be handsomely credentialed, this campus leader seems merely self-serving as he prepares to launch into a world of financial and political power the people

of Knox County could never hope to enter. He must be confidently aware that a credentialed activist will find plenty of room in socially sensitive corporations pretentiously seeking to right injustice. It does not occur to Bunch, an admirer of Tom Hayden and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), to critique this young man’s motivations, nor to consider that, if the ivory tower is falling, one reason may be that activism has substituted for a degree plan at many colleges today.

When this book abandons the pretense of objective, on-the-scene investigative reporting and presents information, it has more value. It provides a retrospective on the significant educational accomplishments of the post-World War II period, summarizes several academic studies of higher education, and pinpoints some of the political and economic developments leading to oppressive indebtedness and declining enrollment. It blames a divided political system for offering no solutions and argues that a massive infusion of government money would solve the problem. The book’s reasoning is weak, however, when it is interlaced with cheerleading for the policy solutions of the Democrat Party. In a comment on the dust jacket, Nancy Maclean, author of a “deep history” of radical right conspiracies, affirms that *After the Ivory Tower Falls* is “a must-read for Democrats, in particular, to stop pushing snake oil to rightly suspicious voters.” This assessment is clarified in Bunch’s introduction: The American Dream of college, it seems, has become

“a ladder greased with a snake oil called meritocracy.”

Thus, the book presents a choice between a corruptly administered meritocracy and the sort of universal higher education financed by the GI-Bill after World War II. Although that bill succeeded in opening higher education to a wide range of people, the view of college as a “public good” supported by large government subsidies, Bunch maintains, was later replaced by privatizing and a cut in those subsidies, thus causing less accessibility and greater debt for student and college. In Bunch’s view, this ill-advised policy shift was accompanied by a hypocritical promotion of meritocracy, so this concept receives a great deal of condemnation.

Granted, those who preside over meritocratic systems can be wrong about the potential of those they wish to exclude. The President of the University of Chicago, for example, was spectacularly mistaken when he argued that a mob of returning WWII veterans would be unfit for academic life. Another problem with merit is that it can be bought rather than earned. SAT tests can be prepared for, and those who have access to tutors and prep courses are generally the privileged of society, leaving others at a disadvantage. Legacy admissions also fall under this category. Are such students part of what Thomas Jefferson envisioned as a “natural aristocracy” or simply a carry-over from past systems of financial and social privilege?

Although it is true that meritocracy can be skewed to the advantage of the

privileged few, SATs and the like still measure ability and are highly correlated with college success. Further, Bunch does not admit that alternatives represented as more democratic are also manipulable. One does not have to look far to discover the “highest public good” being redefined from, say, “universal higher education” to “diversity.” The result can be deliberate discrimination based on accidental physical attributes rather than attained mental ones. Needless to say, in the end, neither universal higher education nor diversity correlates to excellence.

Other problems with higher education are identified and explained, but not persuasively integrated into the book’s argument. For example, on “credential inflation,” Bunch rightly argues that a diploma should not be necessary for jobs such as bank teller and data entry, but he seems unaware that this contradicts his proposal to increase the number of college students. In addition, he notes the inflation of tuition prices, especially by the Ivy League, even through the worst of economic times, and the substitution of foreign and out-of-state full-tuition-paying students for in-state residents, but his analysis of these crucial issues is slight. Instead, he blames Wall Street and Republicans: the first for causing the 2008 financial crisis and the second for budget cutting and privatization of education during the days of stagflation. He also faults Presidents Reagan and Trump for turning the public against higher education. But he gives no consideration to those presidents’

sense that the “democratization” of higher education had created and coddled an elite radical class bent on undermining the society that created them.

The SDS receives much praise in this book because it regarded the university as the “place where a democratic America could be saved—if students and faculty were allowed to convert their knowledge into political power.” But the book does not ask how that political power, now embodied in speech codes and political correctness, is democratic. Reagan was prescient if he thought to curb a system creating a surplus of degreed rent seekers far out of proportion to its number of productive workers, which resulted in unelected, inefficient, and ensconced bureaucracies forcing progressive cultural change on less powerful Americans.

With its concern for the democratic accessibility of college, I wondered if Bunch’s conclusion would reconsider the deplorables he observed in Knox County. But the question, “Why are the economically distressed citizens there underrepresented in higher education?” is never asked. What would the author, his projected readership, and Kenyon College have thought if the garage owner’s son, laboring over the oil pit, a veteran of the next Gulf War, happy to be restored home after the irrationality and brutality of combat, hungry for knowledge but perhaps skeptical of the civilizational benefits of transgenderism . . . would someday apply to Kenyon? Would the idea of college as “public good” apply to him? Or is a MAGA American mere-

ly a prop to reassure a smug audience of like-minded people that they made the right choices? In the end, one suspects that Bunch and the class he represents want universal higher education to make more progressives like themselves, because ordinary life does not form them at the rate they would prefer. Colleges and universities are simply the means of institutionalizing their political preferences.

If only there were a way they didn’t have to pay back those student loans . . .

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