




2-25-2016

# The Republic of Ignorance

Daniel R. DeNicola  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/philfac>

 Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

DeNicola, Daniel R. "The Republic of Ignorance." Gettysburg Times (February 25, 2016), A4.

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/philfac/48>

This open access opinion is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# The Republic of Ignorance

## **Abstract**

Ignorance is trending. Despite universal compulsory education; despite new tools for learning and great advances in knowledge; despite breathtaking increases in our ability to store, access, and share a superabundance of information - ignorance flourishes. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Ignorance, First Amendment, Voting, Citizenry, Public Education

## **Disciplines**

American Politics | Ethics and Political Philosophy | Philosophy

## **Comments**

This opinion piece appeared in the *Gettysburg Times* on February 25, 2016.



## The republic of ignorance

Ignorance is trending. Despite universal compulsory education; despite new tools for learning and great advances in knowledge; despite breathtaking increases in our ability to store, access, and share a superabundance of information—ignorance flourishes.

I am not talking about the vast surround of the unknown that motivates research and scholarship. I refer to public ignorance, by which I mean widespread, reprehensible ignorance of matters that are significant for our lives together.

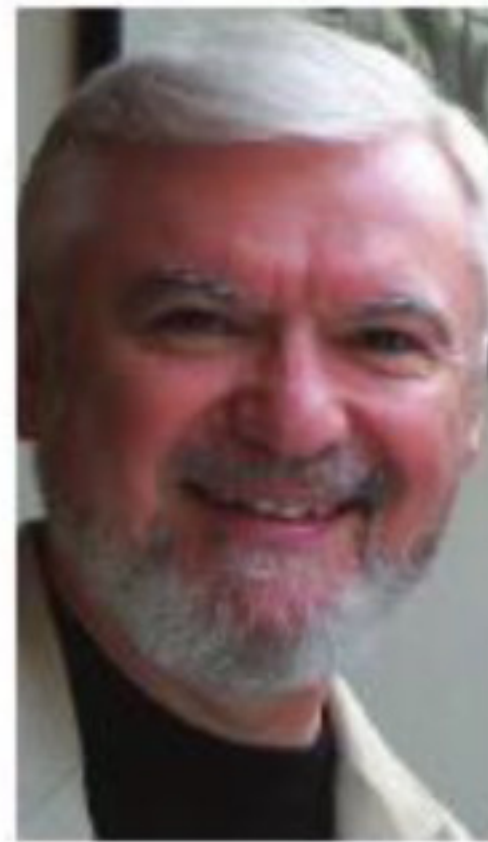
Tyrants have always appreciated the advantages of an ignorant populace. But democracies—at least in theory—rest on the pillar of an enlightened citizenry and institute public education to prepare such citizens. Public ignorance in an advanced democracy is especially troubling; but, unfortunately, the problem in the United States is now so severe that the ideal of an informed citizenry seems quaint.

Examples abound. The National Constitution Center reported that a third of survey respondents could not name any First Amendment rights; forty-two percent believed the Constitution states that “the first language of the United States is English”; and a quarter thought it established Christianity as the official government religion. Recently, a viral video showed students in a public university who couldn’t say which side won the Civil War and couldn’t even identify the two sides.

During the worst of the Ukrainian conflict, another respected survey asked Americans to locate the country on a map. On average, their responses were off by over 1800 miles, with some placing Ukraine in Africa, Latin America, or Canada! Worse: the greater the error in locating the country, the more likely the respondent was to advocate U.S. intervention. It’s dangerous when confidence built on ignorance motivates action.

Politics and geography are not the only areas of public ignorance—it ranges over many basic fields of knowledge. Clearly, we might say, our schools are not delivering an enlight-

**Daniel R. DeNicola**



ened citizenry. This sort of ignorance is removable in principle, but what is being learned for tests is not retained, not embedded as a deeper understanding. But bashing the schools is a knee-jerk response: this isn’t the whole story.

The irony is that we construct and defend much of public ignorance ourselves. It is motivated, willful ignorance, often bolstered by false knowledge and anchored by prejudice and ideology. Our culture celebrates ignorance, flaunts it as a badge of pride! This culture distrusts expertise and mainstream sources of information, and it rejects science. Evidence and conclusions are selectively accepted or stubbornly dismissed. Ridiculous conspiracy theories deny established facts; their advocates have the “real truth”—but this is only illusion, ignorance in drag.

As a nation, we have to spend too much time, energy, and capital battling willful ignorance: “Vaccinations cause autism.” “The earth is 4004 years old and Neanderthals roamed with dinosaurs.” “The wild winter in my state disproves global warming.” “President Obama is Muslim.” “The Sandy Hook massacre never happened.” These claims represent a refusal to know and the denial of the possibility of error. Their proponents assert their “right to believe”—a silly claim without acknowledging responsibility for their beliefs. Who weeps for the truth?

Though the term sounds harsh, ignorance is merely a lack of knowl-

edge. We are all ignorant of many things. Sometimes it seems that the problem is not ignorance, but stupidity, which is the inability to learn. But people who are willfully ignorant are not necessarily stupid, though their resistance to learning may project the appearance of stupidity.

So what causes willful ignorance? Social critics have suggested possible causes: the attitudes of religious fundamentalism and partisan political ideology, along with more subtle causes: the attacks on ideals like truth and reason; the confusion of factual news with entertainment; the attention to image over substance. And our ignorance can be sustained by today’s “user-preference” technology. Whatever our beliefs, we may enjoy a cozy informational cocoon in which we hear only the news, opinions, music, and voices, we prefer. Ideas that might challenge our views never reach us.

Public education’s challenge then becomes much more difficult, for the problem is not only unlearned information. It is our attitudes toward learning and truth. Acknowledging one’s ignorance and the possibility of being wrong is the first step to an open mind. It is cognitively healthy: it prepares us for learning, directs our curiosity, and takes us into the real world. Pursuing the truth takes intellectual courage. Finding the truth is often difficult. Accepting the truth may be the hardest part.

Public education’s most important task today is to melt the resistance to learning anything that challenges our beliefs, to develop a communal form of critical thinking, and to instill lifelong openness to truth—because the greatest threat to our democracy is our own ignorance.

*Daniel R. DeNicola is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Gettysburg College and the author of Learning to Flourish: A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education. He is a guest writer for the Education Task Force of the Gettysburg Area Democracy for America group.*