

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bal-op.livingston25oct25,1,6169908.story>

The limits of Bush's mind

By Gordon Livingston

October 25, 2005

President Bush persists in his defense of the policies that have resulted in the decline of his fortunes.

In his recent rehearsed television conversation with 11 soldiers in Iraq, he said, "So long as I'm the president, we're never going to back down, we're never going ... to accept anything less than total victory." Twice he told them that the American people were behind them: "You've got tremendous support here at home." In an Associated Press poll taken in September, over half the public now says the Iraq war was a mistake.

What's happening? Is the man so insulated from the reality of events that he has come to believe his administration's propaganda? Or is there a more ominous and pervasive problem that calls into question something other than political ideology, that is influenced by a world view marked by an inability to reason logically and learn from experience?

The ability to reason accurately is not randomly distributed; some people are better at it than others. Though this is only one form of intelligence, it is an important one, and the lack of it tends to have adverse consequences on one's chances for success at tasks that require good decision-making.

While reason affects our beliefs, the process of correctly perceiving how the world works requires an understanding of the scientific method, and is fundamentally different from religious or philosophical inquiries that are concerned with questions of meaning and faith. When the two ways of thinking become confused, as in the controversy over evolution and "intelligent design," we are engaging in a kind of dialogue of the deaf in which scientific theory is pitted against religious belief.

A 2004 Harris poll on religion is instructive. Ninety percent of adult Americans professed a belief in God. More interesting, half believe in ghosts, nearly one-third believe in astrology and more than one-fourth believe that they were reincarnated from other people. Two-thirds believe in the devil and hell (but very few expect that they will go there themselves).

A nation can afford only so much superstition. For example, 12th-graders recently performed below the international average for 21 countries in math and science. This is an ominous statistic at a time when much energy is being expended in educational circles debating whether a creationist belief ought to be taught alongside evolution in science classrooms.

It has been said that the primary difference between intelligence and stupidity is that there are limits to intelligence. The human quality required for the progress of any civilization is curiosity. This desire to formulate and try to answer important questions about our world is the fundamental driving force behind all scientific inquiry. It is in the nature of religious dogmatism to close the doors to discovery.

If one is required by one's faith to believe that the world is 6,000 years old and was created by God in six days, there is no evidence, geological or otherwise, that will cause such a believer to change his or her mind. This is the difference between a scientific theory, which can be disproved, and a religious belief, which

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bal-op.livingston25oct25,1,5616997,print.st...> 10/26/2005

cannot.

The Bush administration is forever instructing us in "the lessons of 9/11." One would think that a primary moral of that event would be that we are all at risk from those who are sure that they are the chosen of God.

We seem not to have learned this, however, and are still expected to listen with respect to the rantings of people with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other, those who believe that the state should be in the killing business, those who would confer personhood on a microscopic collection of cells, those who would deny us all the benefits of stem cell research, those who believe that good works are insufficient credentials to enjoy life everlasting and those who would force us all to listen to their prayers and live under laws that comport with their particular interpretation of God's purposes.

Which brings us back to our president: incurious, inarticulate and insulated from people and information that might contradict his "gut feelings" or religious beliefs. To fulfill the duties of our national chief executive, intelligence is not enough - Woodrow Wilson taught us that - but a conspicuous lack of it is fatal.

Gordon Livingston, a psychiatrist who lives in Columbia, is the author of Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart.

Copyright © 2005, [The Baltimore Sun](#) / [Get Sun home delivery](#)