Oh, woe is the conservationist who tries to talk sense to the wolf-haters, climate change-deniers, DDT-lovers, and others of their ilk. Science, facts, and reason wilt as lances against the brick wall of populist anti-intellectualism. In fact, being handy with scientific facts and concepts about conservation issues can even be a handicap because some folks will label you as an intellectual and therefore not to be trusted. Thus, we can’t begin to understand anticonservationists without knowing how anti-intellectualism marbles through their skull-meat.

A continuing theme in Around the Campfire is probing what makes anticonservationists tick. It doesn’t take much probing to learn that anti-intellectualism is an underlying trait of theirs. We most often are slapped with hostility to facts in strongholds of ignorance like New Mexico’s Catron County, but anti-intellectualism runs rife through all demographics. After all, for the last seven years, the most powerful man in the world, leader of the Free World, and president of the United States has also reigned as the Chief Anti-Intellectual, and the United States Congress is chock full of the little buggers.

So, let’s take a quick look at the powerful pulse of anti-intellectualism in American public discussion through our
history. Then I’ll try to draw a lesson or two for how it applies in conservation struggles.

In his 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, distinguished American historian Richard Hofstadter found anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism python-coiled around American culture and politics. Whether in religion, politics, business, agriculture, labor unions, or education, Hofstadter shows how common-man populism right and left has gagged on supposed educated, intellectual elites. Hofstadter didn’t include anticonservationists in his 1964 study because they weren’t much of a factor then, but what he wrote about the other guilds of dumbness applies very well to many of our foes today. Moreover, science, especially biology, is now seen by many as a key plank in the scaffolding of intellectualism.

Throughout American society, Hofstadter sees intellectuals portrayed as “pretentious, conceited, effeminate, and snobbish; and very likely immoral, dangerous, and subversive.” He describes this attitude as “The plain sense of the common man, especially if tested by success in some demanding line of practical work, is an altogether adequate substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise acquired in schools.”¹ This trait of anti-intellectualism runs especially strong through the anticonservation movement. For example, a lifetime of the

dirty work of castrating little bulls makes one more of an expert on animal behavior—including wolves—than having a Ph.D. in ecology or wildlife biology with years of experience in the field. Causing soil erosion for forty years makes one a better land manager than studying and experimenting with stopping erosion over a like period of time.

Hofstadter acknowledges that anti-intellectualism has become “a broadly diffused quality in our civilization...because it has often been linked to good, or at least defensible causes.” In religion, because of an evangelism with “many humane and democratic sentiments.” In politics, because of “our passion for equality.” In addition, today’s anti-intellectuals “have not found it necessary to originate a single new argument, since this mythology is deeply rooted in our historical experience.” This is as true today as it was when Hofstadter wrote more than forty years ago. American anti-intellectuals have consistently seen intellect as opposed to feeling, character, practicality, and democracy. Of course, intellectuals such as postmodern deconstructionists, free-market economists, and neoconservatives are richly deserving of lay skepticism. And sneering at the needed use of emotion in arguing for conservation is just plain foolishness.

Anti-intellectualism as a movement first appeared in religion as early as 1700. Later generations of Puritan

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4 This is not the place to discuss the problems of haughty intellectualism among some academic conservation historians or know-it-all biologists.
ministers were schooled in the classics in addition to the Bible, and became more tolerant and dispassionate as they became more educated. This led to the Great Awakening in 1720 as fiery, unschooled preachers conducted revivals among the settlers. Scots-Irish on the frontier were particularly attracted to this new style of religion. My family fell headlong into it, and a few have never clambered out. One Anglican minister who toured the backwoods of the Carolinas in the 1760s and 1770s wrote that the evangelical preachers “despise Knowledge.”

The new preachers and their followers turned their noses up at formal education because it watered down the spirit. Hofstadter finds that “American anti-intellectualism owes much of its strength and persuasiveness” to the evangelical denominations. Such populist Protestantism, with its theology of “personal access to God,” fit perfectly with political attitudes of rugged individualism and common-man democracy, as well as with the notion that one did not need education or educated elites to understand God, or anything else, for that matter.

Given the depth of anti-intellectualism in America, Hofstadter finds that “it is ironic that the United States should have been founded by intellectuals.” Indeed, has there ever been such a grouping of educated, philosophical political leaders as at the founding of the United States? The downfall

5 Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 75.
6 Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 56.
7 Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 145.
of the intellectual in politics came with vicious partisan attacks on Thomas Jefferson—some Karl-Rove-type Federalists charging that his genius made him untrustworthy and unfit to lead. In a fine preview of how later anti-intellectuals have found subversion in foreign notions, one Federalist wrote:

It was in France, where he resided nearly seven years, and until the revolution had made some progress, that his disposition to Theory, and his skepticism in religion, morals, and government, acquired full strength and vigor....Mr. Jefferson is known to be a theorist in politics, as well as in philosophy and morals. He is a philosophe in the modern French sense of the word.

Freedom fries, anyone?

This common man politics grew into the Jacksonian movement in the 1820s. It was based on a “widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and the well-to-do.” The election of rough-hewn soldier and westerner Andrew Jackson over bookish John Quincy Adams in 1828 was a triumph of anti-intellectualism and common man ideology. So resounding a victory it was, that in 1840 Daniel Webster, one of the great intellectuals of American statecraft, took “The Davy Crockett Line” and said that anyone “who called him an aristocrat was ‘not only a LIAR

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8 Address to the Citizens of South Carolina on the Approaching Election of a President and Vice-President of the United States. By a Federal Republican. (Charleston, 1800). Quoted in Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 149.
9 Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 154.
but a COWARD.’” Henry Clay privately “lamented the necessity, real or imagined...of appealing to the feelings and passions of our Countrymen, rather than to their reasons and judgments.” Hofstadter points out that Clay then did exactly that in the 1840 presidential race. I wonder if Newt Gingrich, alone and morose at night with a bottle of Jack, laments like Clay?

This Jacksonian strain in American politics has reigned since, lashing out at intellectual reformers in the Progressive movement a century ago, at Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Brain Trust in the 1930s and 1940s, and at Adali Stevenson and other “pointy-headed” intellectuals since World War Two. Much of the burning dislike of Al Gore among reporters and rednecks alike is lit by his intellectualism and the way he uses science as the bedrock of his message.

Similar anti-intellectualism arose in other spheres of American culture. In 1924, a businessman wrote an article entitled “Why I Never Hire Brilliant Men.” In it, he proclaimed that “I am mediocre...business and life are built upon successful mediocrity.” In agriculture, Hofstadter writes that “the advocates of agricultural improvement and the gentlemen farmers were resented by dirt farmers. This resentment had in it an element of class feeling....”

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Intelligent, progressive ranchers today, like Jim Winder of New Mexico, get this same resentment from my-granddaddy-done-it-this-way ranchers, who are losing their shirts and their soil with bad grazing practices.

Labor unions, too, grew strains of this anti-intellectualism. Hofstadter writes that “the labor movement was in a very real sense the creation of intellectuals. But it was a child that turned upon its own father in order to forge its distinctive character.”\textsuperscript{14} In the early days of the last century even the Socialist Party had a strong anti-intellectual element. Oregon delegates to the 1912 convention in Indianapolis would not eat at a restaurant that had tablecloths. According to Thomas Sladden, secretary of the Oregon Socialist Party, the proletarian in the Socialist Party would, “With one swoop…tear away your puny intellectuality, your bogus respectability and as master of all he surveys he will determine what is right and what is wrong.”\textsuperscript{15} The Spotted Owl-hating loggers of Oregon in recent decades are direct descendants of these old Oregon Socialists, many of who were loggers. It’s easy to imagine Tom Sladden alive today ripping through streams on his proletarian ATV.

Education itself was also affected by anti-intellectualism. Because of “certain peculiarities of American education,” such as “democratic assumptions and the universality of its aims,” there arose even “within professional education...an influential

\textsuperscript{14} Hofstadter, \textit{Anti-Intellectualism}, 282.
\textsuperscript{15} Hofstadter, \textit{Anti-Intellectualism}, 290-291.
anti-intellectual movement.”16 And now we have the anti-evolution crusade in public schools.

I’ve surfed through Hofstadter’s comprehensive work on American anti-intellectualism because anti-intellectualism—in religion, politics, music, popular culture, business, agriculture, labor, and education—is a key part of the anticonservation movement. It is something conservationists must understand since it forms the basis for one of the most wounding charges against conservationists and environmentalists—elitism. As Hofstadter writes, “Anti-intellectualism...is founded in the democratic institutions and the egalitarian sentiments of this country.”17 In that light it is a good, honorable part of America and a bulwark against tyranny. When it celebrates ignorance, shortsightedness, and irresponsibility, however, it is a grave threat to American freedom and traditions—as well as to healthy ecosystems and thriving populations of wolves and elk.

Now, how might we conservationists deal with the anti-intellectualism that powerfully pumps through our foes’ arteries like crank? As important as it is to have the facts and good thinking on our side, we must make ample use of emotional (aesthetic and ethical) pleas as well. Depending on the audience, we should strategically shape our stories. When I was talking to crusty old ranchers about wilderness in the 1970s, I played up on how we needed wilderness areas to keep

16 Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 323.
17 Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism, 407.
frontier virtues alive and to toughen our young people with self-reliance so that we could continue to face a hostile world. My goal was not to turn them into Bob Marshalls, but just to gain enough common ground with them so that they could listen to me.

It’s also crucial to understand, however, that none of our arguments, including the emotional, are going to have much effect with deep-seated Nature haters. Indeed, given their inherent turnoff to any kind of intellectual or educated argument, it is not only a waste of time to directly engage such foes, it probably has negative consequences in steeling their pig-headedness all the more against us. Our hardcore foes are not the audience for any kind of proconservation message from us—though they are an audience for us to show our toughness.

Not everyone in rural areas or every rancher or logger is a cast-in-stone foe of wolves and wilderness, of course. But because of deep-seated anti-intellectualism, we need to be careful in how we approach them. The key here is the messenger. Certainly messengers with a strong smell of intellectualism and not a whiff of practical ability are going to be sneered at. However, a conservationist who knows how to handle guns, horses, and the like, even if he or she is a scientist, may gain respect. Heck, eating a steak can create a breakthrough.

For example, Brian Miller, Ph.D., carnivore biologist, and now manager of the Wind River Ranch in northeastern New
Mexico, because of his folksy personality (he was raised on a farm), and his deft hand with horses, ranch machinery, barbed-wire, irrigation, weed removal, bison “management,” and other “real-world” skills, is able to work very well with his neighbors on conservation initiatives, like river otter reintroduction. They like and respect him. Although cows have been removed from the Wind River Ranch, Brian was able to get his local county commission to repeal their anti-prairie dog ordinance. (I’m only scratching the surface of the many effective ways Brian has worked with his community.)

Back in the 1970s, one New Mexico rancher, who regularly showed up at hearings to oppose conservationists, took to calling me “that educated horseshoer.” I took this as a huge compliment and as confirmation that being a redneck, rural conservationist was working a little in getting our foes to at least accept me as a credible defender of wilderness. I can’t play that role today, but we sure need more conservationists like Brian Miller who can. Rod Mondt and Dave Petersen of Trout Unlimited have scads of practical outdoor experience, skills, and knowledge, as do Oscar Simpson of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation and Ronni Egan of Great Old Broads for Wilderness. Messenger, messenger, messenger.

Even hardened anticonservationists might work with conservationists if the price is right. Here, it’s best to not even discuss the issues, but to just work together on a ranch buy-out or other financial arrangement.

Overall, we conservationists need to be aware of how
strong anti-intellectualism moves in our foes and in some potential friends as we plan our messages and campaigns. In none of this am I suggesting we weaken our ethics, passion, or policies. Along with anti-intellectualism, a deep dislike of weaklings flows through the minds of practical people. Be strong. Predators always pick out the weakest prey.

Dave Foreman
Little San Pasquale Wilderness Area, New Mexico

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