



Longbranch Research Associates *presents:*

So-Called Experts

a book always in progress & free

by Stephan Michelson

Chapter 12

Expert Talk

as of December 20, 2016

Robert Hughes, who might be called an expert in architecture and art (not in doing them, but in reviewing them), decries the state of architectural criticism.

... the important task of discussing our built environment tends to be assigned [in newspapers] to people who, by rights, should be confining themselves to the more evanescent aspects of kitchen "lifestyle" and interior decoration.¹

Hughes would presumably approve my taking on topics such as kettles, faucets and bottles, maybe even doors. Nothing more encompassing. I do not know what he thinks of new buildings in China, nor do I care. If what I said in Chapters 1 and 2 resonates with you, then what Hughes says should not.

Whom do we know as an architectural critic? Jane Jacobs comes foremost to mind.² She was not a professional anything (city planner, say), but was the most perceptive and, I hope, influential critic of architecture in its purpose of building a livable environment.³ Her husband was an architect, but I do not think expertise comes by proxy. My point here, and throughout this book, is that it does not come from nor is it identified by credentials, either.

1 Robert Hughes, "Master Builders," a review of a book by Martin Filler, whom Hughes considers an expert critic. 54 *New York Review of Books* 14, September 27, 2007 at 46.

2 Jacobs' most prominent achievement is surely *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage Books, 1963.

3 See Greg Lindsay's criticism of the assumption that "armed with enough data and computing muscle, we can translate cities' complexity into algorithms." Even if that were so, why would one approach the issue that way? "Not-So-Smart Cities," *New York Times*, September 25, 2011 at SR16. Jacobs summed up this whole book in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1992):

It is not easy for uncredentialed people to stand up to the credentialed, even when the so-called expertise is grounded in ignorance and folly.

An expert, we might think, is someone who gets things right. That raises the question of what “right” is and how we know it. However, that definition is insufficient. Many an expert physicist has been found to be wrong, and it was that being wrong—presenting a plausible theory that was disproved—that entitled him or her to the “expert” label. Noam Chomsky might be wrong about just how much language ability is “hard wired” into an infant’s brain, but surely some is, and one cannot deny Chomsky’s status as a pioneer, indeed, as an expert linguist. Similarly, Alan Dershowitz is acknowledged to be a legitimately expert attorney and law professor. Dershowitz and Chomsky both lecture on United States foreign policy, specifically concerning Israel. Their positions are polar opposites. Can they both be experts in that field? They certainly cannot both be correct, but how can we tell which—if either—is?

Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, presumably an expert on the middle east, spoke to the United States Congress on March 3, 2015. His focus was on Iran, specifically warning about Iran’s nuclear ambitions. In previous speeches, Netanyahu had made the same points, embellished with predictions, such as that Iran would not live up to the promises it made just to hold these talks. None of what Netanyahu predicted came to pass. Nothing he said was true. Why is he invited back again as if he were an expert, when it is clear that he is not?

The problem is often not the lack of a real expert, but the inability of others to discern who is one. Expertise thus goes un-utilized. William Easterly describes

how the New Zealand economist John Bell Condliffe, who advocated free development in pre-1949 China, also pointed out opportunities for global development from increased trade. His reward was to be ignored and forgotten, but he has turned out to be right.⁴

The first “science” expert witness whose name we know was John Smeaton, testifying in *Folkes v. Chadd* in England in 1682. Although he is sometimes named as the first science expert to appear in court, surely others preceded him. Contemporaneous accounts did not consider the fact of his testimony unusual. Smeaton was allowed to give his opinion about the consequences of a proposed land modification, and thus became the first witness whose expert opinion was recorded for historians to find. Smeaton’s testimony was not allowed at the first *Folkes* trial,

4 William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts*, Basic Books (2013) at 234. Easterly also praises the work of S. Herbert Frankel, who “joined the long list of now-forgotten liberal economists that the new development economists of the 1950s did not deem worthy to debate” (at 100). Frankel thought the United Nations should not support dictators who promise economic development. They cannot deliver. Economic development, he said, requires individual freedom more than western “expertise.” He has been proved correct.

which because of his exclusion led to a second trial in which his opinion was heard, and prevailed. Nonetheless, there was yet a third trial, in which his expert opinion was rejected by the jury, and Smeaton's client lost.

The question arises, more than 300 years later, was Smeaton perhaps correct? He had said that certain barriers erected by his client would have little effect on the filling in of the harbor at issue. The harbor would silt in with or without them. Tearing down these barriers, which had been constructed to make arable land, would not rescue the harbor. The real forces, said Smeaton, were larger than this. Such issues are seldom subject to empirical verification, but when Folkes lost, the barriers were torn down to save the harbor. As Smeaton had predicted, the harbor silted over anyway. Smeaton really was expert; the many so-called experts on the prevailing side were not. The jury got it wrong.

The Untouchable Military

In 2004, the U. S. Army modified its field uniform. They used Velcro to close cargo pockets that are attached to the legs. This added 96¢ to the cost of a uniform, but if it made it better, well, anything for our soldiers.

Except that it did not make the uniform better. Soldiers complained that, in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Velcro took on sand and failed to function. The army recommended that soldiers use their small weapons cleaning brush to excise the sand. Besides adding an unnecessary task, that procedure might not be convenient when running to hide from a sniper, spilling one's pocket contents along the way.

Snaps and buttons were identified as possible fixes for failing Velcro. The Army surveyed 2,700 soldiers who tested prototypes, and 60% said they preferred buttons and 29% liked snaps. Just 11% wanted to keep Velcro, according to the Army.⁵

That is, six years later, soldiers—the people who used these uniforms every day—finally were consulted. In their opinions, the uniform designers were not expert. One is led to ask, why did the army not first produce samples, test them in combat, and receive feedback from the users? Neither in the public sector nor in private industry are designs adequately tested before they are put into production. The designers, it is assumed, are experts.

We should not be surprised by this story. There is a long history of incompetent design of military uniforms. For example, bright red is not a good

5 Tom Vanden Brook, "Sand drives Army to ditch Velcro on pants," *USA Today*, June 16, 2010.

disguise in a forest. The British “Redcoats” were easily seen, and picked off by rebels—we call them revolutionaries—in the North American colonies. Not having learned their lesson, “from 1870 onwards, the more vivid shade of scarlet was adopted for all ranks.”⁶ It is true that, in close combat, a uniform’s color can help distinguish friend from foe; but I think that is not a good reason to adopt a conspicuous color, only a unique one.

Consider the French at the start of World War I:

Infantry wore a dark blue double-breasted tailcoat with brass buttons. . . . Baggy red trousers tucked into half-boots completed the outfit, which was topped with a kepi, a cylindrical cloth cap with a stiff brim: stylish but little protection against a bullet.⁷

One does not criticize the military. That seems like a long-standing tradition, although not a good one. Nonetheless, the military does adapt to reality—or used to. On entering combat the problems with the French uniform became obvious. The uniform was quickly changed.

Given its importance, one would think that expertise in making military decisions—from uniforms to armaments to actions—would be a high priority of the U.S. government. And therefore of public discussion. That is clearly not true. Let’s ask why.

On September 10, 2007, General David Petraeus testified before congress. He was at that time a four-star general. He had demonstrated expertise at rising through army ranks. Other generals had been replaced and dismissed, forced to retire, because they disagreed with President Bush’s view of what was happening in Iraq. Petraeus was more politically adept. In terms of military advice, perhaps these other generals should have been considered experts, but is congress actually looking for expertise?

No. In politics, as in law, people look for support for their position. To politicians, only witnesses who agree with them are “experts.” In earlier legislative hearings, so-called experts disagreed on such topics as how Iraq soldiers would respond to “shock and awe.” Those who thought little of that approach had real expertise, but the others expressed views the administration wanted to hear, and so prevailed. Donald Rumsfeld seemed to be expert at nothing except winning internal Washington battles. President Bush let him be in charge of the defense department,

6 *Wikipedia* under “Red_coat_(British_army).”

7 John Baxter, *Paris at the End of the World*, Harper Perennial (2014), at 40.

where he achieved no good that I can see. He did have a vision of a future army, using different military technology. Whatever the merit of that position, Rumsfeld failed to support his contemporary army. He supplied trucks with insufficient armor, vulnerable to “improvised” explosive devices. Perhaps it would be better if people engaged in such internecine battles were experts at what the battles are about, not just in how to win them; but that is not how Washington works.

Talk Radio

Let’s say that the person testifying before congress was considered to be an expert on military affairs, qualified to give us a military assessment of the Iraq situation. Rush Limbaugh spent his three hour program the day of Petraeus’ testimony questioning the expertise of the questioners. On what basis could they hold views contrary to those of the acknowledged expert, Petraeus? Where does expertise come from, Limbaugh wondered, and why should we think our elected representatives have any of it?

These are genuinely good questions. Unfortunately, they were inappropriate to this forum. In theory, congress calls upon experts to provide it with facts its members do not have, and analysis they cannot do. Sometimes—often on persona-driven television programs (Chris Matthews on MSNBC is a prime example)—questions are asked only to further the point of view of the questioner. In congressional hearings, the opposite should be true. The questioner should be trying to gain relevant knowledge. Limbaugh did not ask what the questioner wanted to know, whether knowing it would actually have helped decide any issue before Congress, whether the questions or answers were framed to provide the needed information.

Limbaugh’s comments often appear reasonable until we recognize that they are misdirected by his ignorance of facts or situations, or by an agenda aimed not to inquire, but to belittle. Often, having asked a question, he then poses as an expert, as one capable of answering it. Rachel Maddow on MSNBC, and Fareed Zakaria on CNN have more rational approaches. Their role is to ask questions. They call upon “experts” to answer them. Are their experts truly expert? How would one know? In the usual case, we do not have 30 or 300 years to wait until the answers will be revealed. One can say, in praise of Maddow, that not all of her “experts” agree with her. Whether on that account they are better experts, or only produce better TV, is hard to determe. Zakaria, except in his opening monologue, usually does not reveal

his views, and therefore the extent to which he invites people with opposing views is not clear.

Limbaugh wanders into many matters including, strangely, the minds of “liberals,” people he mocks. One way of not answering questions is to deride them, pretend they are not serious. Indeed, there are plenty of bad questions out there, but in normal discourse we would expect an expert to explain why a question is inappropriate, and then help the questioner get on a productive track. Mockery is not a tactic in a discussion. It is disengagement from the discussion..

Limbaugh has also mastered the straw man method of debate: Make up a caricature of your opponent’s views, and then expose *its* weakness. He did not ask why we should think that Petraeus is speaking from expertise, as opposed to a sense of what it will take Petraeus (given his many predecessors) to keep his job. Limbaugh assumed that Petraeus was an expert, because he liked Petraeus’ answers. Whatever the criteria are for determining who is a real expert, that you agree with him should not be one of them. Maddow knows that, one reason her interviews are informative.

All this is show, however. Limbaugh’s conclusions stem from assumptions he has made. They are not derived from facts or a view of what facts we need to know. Like Matthews, Rush Limbaugh is not looking for answers. He already has them. No “expert” will change his mind, because those who disagree with him cannot be experts.

More importantly, when the military is the subject, no one is looking for expertise. No one has questions he/she wants answered.

This has become the way we assume the American military will be discussed by politicians and in the press: Overblown, limitless praise, absent the caveats or public skepticism we would apply to other American institutions, especially ones that run on taxpayer money.⁸

The way the military operates—without either expertise or criticism—is too large a topic for this book. I will return to it, however, in Chapter 16. Here we can look at the way military issues are discussed in public forums.

We treat movie reviewers the way attorneys treat statistical experts, and listeners treat radio personalities. We praise the reviewers who steer us to films that we like. To a large extent, we never know what they are steering us *away* from. To

8 James Fallows, “The Tragedy of The American Military,” *The Atlantic*, January-February, 2015 at 74.

test the reviewer, one would have to go to films he advised us *not* to see. Does anyone do that?

Much of what passes as “thinking” on the radio is nothing more than calling people names, something I thought we left behind after sixth grade. Provide health services to people who cannot afford them? Let’s call that socialism, and make clear that “socialism” is a dirty word. Having named it something we should be against, let’s be against it. Government employment is increasing faster than private employment? Let’s measure from January through June, 2010, and ignore that the Constitution has told the federal government to conduct a Census every ten years, for which it has hired many people indeed. Temporarily.

My view is that universal health services sounds like a good thing for a society to produce. If this is what socialist societies also do, then I want to learn more about them. At equivalent income levels, people who live in countries with universal health services are healthier than Americans. Why should the label dominate the idea? Why should assigning a label be part of the debate about the value of that idea? The problem with “talk radio” is that it is talk. Where is “think” radio? That is what experts would do—real experts.

This Chapter

“Talk radio” (and TV) is important. Talk radio hosts will tell you that this is how people who do not have a forum get to be heard. In general, it is how those hosts get to be heard, and get wealthy. But let’s not belittle them, much though most of them belittle us. People with a forum, in print or a sound medium, to a large extent define the national conversation by their questions as much as by their answers. They are one reason our discussions are so inane.

This chapter, then, is about public (in media) discussion of issues. Within the parameters of this book, I am concerned with how some of the talkers establish themselves as experts not only in talk, but in the subjects they talk about. I take it one step further. Most of this talk is about politics, so that the opinions we form about who has what expertise—about who *should* have what expertise—are formed here. And so I will ultimately direct this chapter towards a story about a politician, a governor, who demonstrated an immense lack of expertise, as well as lack of respect for expertise, because his agenda had nothing to do with governing. A very bad decision of his, costly to his constituents with no compensating benefits, went by hardly noticed. I wonder not only how inept public discussion is, but how

poorly defined and framed it is. This one governor's decision should have eliminated him from any future political consideration. It did not.

Credentials

Although Rush Limbaugh's "thinking" is itself laughable, his questions, on some occasions, as I indicated above, are good. Let's start by using Limbaugh as an example of what he might think are the sources of expertise.

Limbaugh did not graduate from college. He may respect that expertise *can* come from formal education, but he cannot hold that it *must*. I agree with him. In Chapter 9 I named several successful college dropouts. I quit college after two years, went back after a year in the world. I quit graduate school after two years to spend a year as a street singer. I got my PhD thirteen years after graduating from high school. That seems like a long time, but I had other things to do.

Furthermore, as I wrote in my book, *The Expert*, although I pioneered many innovative statistical methods in litigation, most of which have become accepted as the best ways to analyze the problems for which I used them, I learned few of them in school.

One of the reasons most statistical experts in litigation do poor work is that they believe that they have the requisite tools in hand. They choose among the methodologies they have learned. It was my understanding that my toolbox was inappropriate for the task that led me to find, and even create, other tools. I think college drop-outs, like Limbaugh, sometimes have that creative approach to the world. They were not taught that they know it all, and so they seek answers. Like them, I do not believe that the academy is the sole sanctuary of experts. Many answers are derived elsewhere. We seek them wherever we can find them.

Unfortunately the Rush Limbaughs and Chris Matthews) of the world think they have found all the answers that anyone needs to know, that therefore they *are* the experts. Where does their so-called "knowledge"—which is often simply wrong, indeed, ignorant—come from? Why should anyone believe it? Limbaugh rejects the concept of expertise—except when it suits him—but Beck basks in it. He will tell you that the people he has on air are true experts. But they are not. They are there because they have credentials and agree with him. Beck recommends that his listeners read "everything," not just the works of his so-called experts. Still, he endorses some and shuns others. His listeners understand that they should listen to many, but believe the chosen few.

Limbaugh thinks the questioner should be expert in the same field as the expert being questioned. That would allow only former generals (or at least high ranked officers) to be on house and senate military affairs committees. We are a deeply civil-led nation. We believe the civilian authorities must make decisions that affect the military, and therefore they must understand the military. To understand, they must ask questions. Despite massive evidence to the contrary, Limbaugh considered George W. Bush to be an intelligent, expert president. Then why were his command decisions so disastrous?

Would Limbaugh have generals make all military decisions? Should Douglas MacArthur have decided to invade China when it came to the aid of North Korea? Fortunately, the civilian president, Harry Truman, thought we should not do so, and so we did not. President Truman made a political decision, having nothing to do with MacArthur's military expertise. President Obama, faced with General Stanley McChrystal's overt lack of respect, fired him from the position of leader of our mission in Afghanistan. McChrystal's remarks were insolent, although correct. He was an expert in the problems in Afghanistan, and therefore in the administration of our policies there. His duty would have been to express his ideas to the President. Publicly subverting civil authority is beyond the pale. A military expert should know that.⁹

How do civilian leaders make their military decisions? Civilians gain knowledge from military personnel, who are consultants, providing input to the civilian decision. Military knowledge will not be, *should* not be decisive. Shouldn't military experts be consulted, even if they disagree with the political leaders? Shouldn't they be free to express disagreement without reprisals? That congress forces the purchase of equipment the military itself does not want tells us the answer. Expertise is not part of the political equation.

Questioning The Experts

That leads us to ask, how expert *are* "military experts"? Abraham Lincoln was frustrated, unable to find a general who would engage the Civil War enemy. Ulysses S. Grant's credentials did not argue for his leadership of the Union army; but he had a West Point education, as did his predecessors, and an appropriate "let's get this done" temperament which they lacked. He had something else, finally got the job,

⁹ McChrystal was relieved of his lead duties on June 23, 2010, the day after an article appeared in *Rolling Stone* outlining his views. The public deserves to get an honest assessment from a true expert. McChrystal resigned from the Army a week after being relieved of his command. Why have we not heard more from him about our Afghanistan policies? Why (and how) has such an expert been muted?

and won the war. It is not clear that something else was “expertise,” although Grant was happy to let people think that it was. Some would call it chutzpah. Some would say the North had economic (and moral) superiority, and so would eventually have won, even without superior military acumen. Still, Grant did something former Union commanders did not do. He had the expertise he needed as a general. As is common, the public confused that with the expertise he would need as president.

Supreme Court’s Justice Breyer, we are told,

believes not in liberty against government overreaching, but in what he calls “Active Liberty”—the right of democratic majorities, guided by elite experts, to govern as they see fit.¹⁰

Elite experts! Dissenting from the Supreme Court’s decision that violent video games could not be banned, not even from children, Justice Breyer produced an appendix listing studies that claimed to show the harm done by them.¹¹ Were those studies expert enough to trump the First Amendment interpretation of one’s right to purchase any video game, uninhibited by government fiat? Like most decision makers, Justice Breyer had his mind made up first, and then cited selected “experts” to provide a rationale.

One thing we ask of our presidents, and Supreme Court justices, is that they question those who are called upon to offer advice. We do not ask the justices to *be* such experts, only critically and intelligently to listen to them. The decisions to be made from advice are not exclusively in the domain of that advice—as in political decisions about military activities. Therefore, the receiver of “expert” advice needs to know both how expert it is, and how relevant it is. Questioning the military to make determinations about a war is much like questioning a statistical expert to make a judicial determination. The judge will not be a statistical expert. Nor need he be. His task is to get what he needs from the experts, and then to make a decision outside the experts’ domains.

Peter Diamond, MIT economist, had the credentials, the experience, the backing of fellow economists, when President Obama nominated him to the Federal Reserve Board. He was not confirmed. Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama blocked

10 David E. Bernstein and Josh Blackman, “Oliver Wendell Breyer,” www.concurringopinions.com, July 13, 2011.

11 *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Assn.*, 131 S.Ct. 2729 (2011). Linda Greenhouse described Justice Breyer’s appendix as “contradictory articles neither cited to the court by the parties nor vouched for by the justice himself.” Are they by “experts” or not? Which ones? See Linda Greenhouse, “A Supreme Court Scorecard,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2011.

his nomination. I will note only one specific charge against Diamond—that he advocated Keynesian government spending to get us out of our recession. That is an opinion about fiscal policy over which Diamond, at the Federal Reserve, would have no influence. And as you will learn in the next chapter, Diamond was correct. However, he withdrew, no doubt thinking that a system that allowed someone as ignorant as Senator Shelby first to be a senator, and then to evaluate him, was too absurd to be a part of.¹²

Peter Beinart, then editor of *The New Republic*, supported our 2003 invasion of Iraq. Three years later he realized how wrong he (and his country) had been. Four years after that he published a book trying to generalize from George Bush's bad decision, in conjunction with those made by other presidents.¹³ Why should we take him seriously? By his own admission he was not an expert in 2003. Like Diane Ravitch, who tells us (see Chapter 9) she has seen the errors of her past ways, why is he an expert now? Every expert who, later, says "I was wrong to support X policy," is saying that those he was advising, who followed X policy, were also wrong. Leaders will get bad advice. As with Truman's rejection of McArthur's invasion plans, we count on leaders to see the larger picture, to get it right. Do we need Beinart to tell us how wrong both he and President Bush (43) had been? I appreciate that he understands his past error, but why is having been so wrong before a credential for giving advice now?

What about all those so-called experts, in newspapers, magazines, and on talk radio, who made claims about the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") that turned out to be completely untrue? Paul Krugman notes:

It's remarkable how many supposed experts on health care made claims about Obamacare that were clearly unsupportable.¹⁴

These claims were knowably wrong at the time. Krugman continues:

12 That would have been my view. See Diamond's statement "When a Nobel Prize Isn't Enough," *New York Times*, June 5, 2011 (June 6 in print), where he noted how little understanding of monetary policy there is among some of those responsible for its Congressional oversight.

See also "Peter Diamond withdraws as Federal Reserve nominee," *New York Times*, June 6, 2011. For more on the inexpertness of the people we ask to be expert on economics, see Chapter 13.

13 Peter Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome: A History Of American Hubris*, Harper, 2010. If I were to try to generalize from our failure in 2003, I would turn to writings of people who opposed the Iraq invasion when it was being considered, for they were the true experts.

14 Paul Krugman, "The Incompetence Dogma," *New York Times*, June 27, 2014.

[T]he supposed experts kept peddling improbable tales of looming disaster long after their chance of actually stopping health reform was past . . .

The fact is that the Affordable Care Act created jobs, has provided millions of people formerly uninsured with medical insurance, and has not “busted” the federal budget. Why will persons previously opposed to the program, predicting a failure that has not occurred, not support it now? Once a so-called expert has taken a position, he (she) will continue to press the point, find supposed evidence for it, and take every opportunity to defend it. Even if clearly wrong.

What about the supposed fiscal disaster of 2010? Radio talkers insisted that “budget deficits and rising debt were the most important issue facing America.”

I'm not sure whether most readers realize just how thoroughly the great fiscal panic has fizzled — and the deficit scolds are, of course, still scolding.¹⁵

Sports critics have worked this all out. Few of them were good athletes. Perhaps it was just this failure that makes them good commentators. Larry Bird was not a good basketball coach. They say it was because he could not understand the mind of the average player, never having been one. Bill Russell, also, was an inferior coach, and Michael Jordan has been no better. Being an athlete is different from being a sports commentator or coach. Being a general and being a senator are different things. One of the tasks of the senator is to treat the general's advice skeptically. It comes, after all, from the people who brought you velcro pocket closures that clog in the sand of Afghanistan.

What do we make of the “austerians,” those who tell us that the way out of a deep recession is to have the federal government spend less. One might hope that they would look at the experience of countries that actually followed such faulty advice. What happens is that the economy gets worse.

This is what happens when an elite claims the right to rule based on its supposed expertise, its understanding of what must be done — then demonstrates both that it does not, in fact, know what it is doing, and that it is too ideologically rigid to learn from its mistakes.¹⁶

As I have been saying, we need experts not only to propose the right policies, but to accept and implement them. Our politicians demonstrate one skill: How to get

15 Paul Krugman, “The Fiscal Fizzle,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2014.

16 Paul Krugman, “Mad as Hellas,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2014.

elected. Yet the skill we elect them to utilize is to derive information from experts. That skill, it is apparent, they do not have. We seem to have no forums in which this point can be discussed intelligently. Paul Krugman's columns, exposing not only perverse "expert" advice, but its equally perverse acceptance by those with authority to act, do not spark debate. They are understood by some, derided by others, and that is the end of it.

Experience

If education is not the route to good questioning, perhaps experience is. Not understanding how irrelevant it is, Rush Limbaugh complains that few representatives are military experts. Can he make the case that members of military affairs committees have no expertise in *questioning* military personnel to learn what they need to know to legislate effectively? He makes no such argument. He is not even aware that this is the argument he needs to make.

The primary way they would get such expertise is the way Rush Limbaugh got his: Learning By Doing. Not only is Limbaugh good at what he does, he is effulgent at telling us how good he is. I appreciate that, not because he could as easily be a charlatan, but because Limbaugh understands this issue. We do not know who is an expert. We do not distinguish well between an expert in talking and an expert in what he is talking about—between form and substance. His network, EIB, stands for "Excellence In Broadcasting." He knows that expertise in the form is more important than expertise in the content, and that what you call it counts more than what it is.

"The Greatest Show On Earth" may or may not have been the greatest show on earth. Nonetheless, proclaiming that it was brought in the crowds. As long as it was then a good show, the crowds were satisfied. "The Magnificent Seven" was a smart remake of "Seven Samurai," adding the qualifier "magnificent" just in case we did not come to that conclusion ourselves. Why is Coca-Cola the "real" thing? Isn't any other cola just as real, if different? The job of advertising is to tell us what is good, whether it is or not, because it is not easy for us non-experts to know. Rush Limbaugh, with "talent on loan from God," operates "flawlessly." He is really good at telling people he is good. Whether he has anything important to say—whether he is even correct—is questionable, and probably irrelevant.

If the content of Rush's package is vacuous, then it must be the wrappings that brings about his popularity. His answers precede his questions. I do not mean to imply—I have already mentioned Chris Matthews as similarly situated, although on

the other side of the left-right fence—that he is alone. Consider this critique of reactions to the Petraeus hearings:

To a remarkable extent, punditry has taken a pass on whether Gen. Petraeus's picture of the situation in Iraq is accurate. Instead, it was all about the theatrics—about how impressive he looked, how well or poorly his congressional inquisitors performed.¹⁷

When talk shows discuss the wrong issues, the public remains uninformed. Rather than question Petraeus' expertise, the press questioned his demeanor. Nor did the press ask whether congressional questions were well phrased to elicit helpful responses, or if Petraeus had any. If there is one thing citizens should be expert at, it is understanding the political options they are offered. Yet if legislators are not evaluated, in the press, by how well they do their legislative duty, how can the public fulfill its citizenship obligations?

Consider Representative Henry Waxman, “the Bush administration’s worst nightmare.” As Representative David Obey said of him:

The leadership knows what they want investigated, but Henry also has some fabulous years of expertise and experience that lets him do something that virtually nobody else in this body could do.¹⁸

“We want to be the party that is ferreting out waste and fraud,” said House Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), “and Henry’s committee is the point of the spear for us.” Experience, having been there, is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for expertise. However, sometimes it is the best route. Practicing something for long enough does not assure that you get good at it, but without that practice, you never will. Experience worked for Henry Waxman, who asks the right questions to improve legislation. That is precisely his job. What Limbaugh is good at is entertaining his listeners. That is *his* job. Rush has never shown us that he would have had better questions of a legislative witness than Henry Waxman. He has never told us what better questions a legislator should have asked, because he does not understand the job of either the legislator or the political reporter.

17 Paul Krugman, “What I Hate About Political Coverage,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2007.

18 All quotes from Jonathan Weisman, “White House Feels Waxman's Oversight Gaze,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 2007; Page A01. John Dean tells us that “only a few members of Congressional committees are good at asking questions.” “Hillary's James Comey Nightmare Likely Continues,” *Verdict* at Justia.com, July 8, 2016.

Talk Radio and Real Expertise

By my criteria, one of the best talk show hosts, whose focus is most directed at relevant facts and opinions, is Thom Hartmann.¹⁹

Who?

Exactly. Thom Hartmann is an expert talk show host if the point of talk shows is to engage in intelligent, even intellectual, and certainly factually informed national debate. But you never heard of him, because that is *not* the point of radio talk shows.²⁰ In this world of so-called experts, you need to inquire just what an expert is expert in. Talk-show hosts are expert at being talk-show hosts, some more, some less.²¹ That's fine. It's just not to be confused with being expert at what they talk about. Except when the subject is sports, few are. I listen to talk shows on occasion, because while often being illogical, and almost always irrelevant, as I wrote above, they define the American conversation. A sad, inept conversation it is.

Rush Limbaugh bases most of his anti-liberal arguments on made-up reactions by caricature liberals, or by his divination of what they are *really* thinking when what they say does not fit his caricature. Not that liberals don't say truly stupid things, deserving all the ridicule anyone can hurl at them. Conservatives probably rank higher than liberals on any ignorance index (if anyone can beat Michelle Bachman at this game it is Sarah Palin), but this is a contest with no winners. Notice the selection of topics. Limbaugh, for example, will not mention the bombing of an abortion clinic on the day it happens, or the next—on the days all other news shows are consumed with the event. He cannot support such an activity, and he cannot criticize it. So he ignores it.

Glenn Beck makes up “facts.” He invents them. If there is anything you do not want to believe, it is what Glenn Beck tells you is a historical fact. Worse, or let's say even more daring than mis-stating history, Beck is willing to tell you that what you think you see is the opposite of what you are really seeing. He shows Israeli commandos attacking a ship, descending from helicopters in international waters, and tells you that this is a picture of the Israeli soldiers somehow being hurt by the

19 The best audience call-in show might be NPR's “On Point.” I am not considering it a talk show of the Limbaugh variety because its focus is the subject, not the host, who tries not to express opinions.

20 I also recommend Norman Goldman, another host you never heard of.

21 Walter Williams, for example, who used to substituted on occasion for Rush Limbaugh, is expert at neither being a talk show host nor being an economist, which he claims to be the rest of the time. Rush tells us that he does not listen to his substitutes. He “evaluates” everyone else, but not the people who speak for him?

people on the ship who try, ineffectively, to defend themselves. Nine of these unarmed passengers died from gunshot wounds. The shooters, we are told, are the victims.²² Israelis still are victims when, in November, 2012, they kill a Hamas leader with a drone missile. This starts an exchange in which ten Palestinians are killed for every Israeli—the usual ratio. Following Beck, American politicians cannot face facts like that. They blame the Palestinians for trying to fight back.²³

Beck's audience does not demand real expertise. They demand comfort in their pre-conceived notions. Having avid followers is more important than having many of them, if the point is to have enough to make millions of dollars from one's program.²⁴ Of course that is the point. Being an actual expert is not.

Liberals can be quite as inane as anyone, and should be held to account for it. By and large liberals try to be skilled in analyzing the facts and situations of the world. Rachel Maddow started her media career that way, but was not the success on radio that she is in television. Fact and analysis-based radio? Those are not reasons why people listen.²⁵

Learning By Doing

If we are to believe the movie *The King's Speech*, the palace of the king of England had trouble accepting the real speech expert, because he did not have the credentials of all those who preceded him, the so-called experts who did not help the king's brother (who, even with his speech impediment, became the king). The real expert was self-taught. Indeed, he was self-learned, in the sense that he made up many of his techniques. That they worked—that he truly was an expert—did not impress the palace functionaries.

22 Prime Minister Netanyahu eventually apologized to the president of Turkey—offering compensation for the wrongful action. See “Obama Brokers Israeli Apology to Turkey,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2013.

23 See Gershon Baskin, “Israel's Shortsighted Assassination,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2012, for a more even-handed account, rare in American media, and unknown in American politics.

24 Becks is the third most popular call-in program, after Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Beck's life evolution, from drug addict and alcoholic to a sober church go-er, is admirable. However, his sobriety is based on prophecies of doom, so far always wrong. See Peter Beinart, “Glenn Beck's Regrets,” *The Atlantic*, January, 2017 at 16.

25 In September, 2007, Rush Limbaugh proclaimed that of course there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; we just haven't found them. The plain and well understood fact is that there were no such weapons, not in 2003, still not in 2007. Rush has held on to this erroneous position well into 2015. The United States had been told time and again by Iraqi insiders that Iraq had no such weapons. United Nations observers, who failed to find such weapons, were kicked out of Iraq not by Saddam Hussein, but by us. Facts and logic do not matter to commentators any more than they did to President Bush.

Courts and commentators have a great deal of trouble with this self-taught concept, as they do with the notion of “expert” in the first place. Some commentators hold that certain fields should be excluded entirely from courts, because the concept of “expertise” within them makes no sense.²⁶ My view is that an expert is better at something than others, than most people. A person who can show that he is better should be allowed to testify as an expert. If it is true that no one can be an expert in, say, handwriting identification, then no one will have a record that would lend credence to his opinion. With a strict view of individual expertise, we need never try to determine that whole fields lack it. So-called experts should be excluded from courts, and from public discourse, individually, not communally.

We read about so-called experts every day. For example:

They are a can-do couple, Ms. Doucette and Mr. Robohm. Ms. Doucette, who is 35 and has butterfly tattoos on her ankle, runs Doucette Duvall clothing company with a partner, Annebet Lauren Duvall, although neither has design training. . . .

Mr. Robohm, who is also 35 and has a degree in environmental science from the University of Vermont, has been doing household repairs ever since his parents bought an 1840s Vermont farmhouse when he was a child. “When the pipes burst, that’s your plumbing lesson,” he said. “When the heating doesn’t work, you either learn how to fix the heater or split wood. And then, on the way to the store, the muffler falls off and you have to fix that. Repairmen didn’t exist in my life.”²⁷

The photographs show Mr. Robohm’s apartment renovation to be clever in concept and excellent in execution and, in to me, in its aesthetic. Perhaps the point of this article was its cost-effectiveness, in which Robohm is also, clearly, an expert. Expertise without credentials. Bravo!

As usual, the rub with expertise is determining if the self-espousing have it. Designers can show us their designs. But then “experts” tell us which designs are “good,” and you read, in the first two chapters of this book, what I think of *them*.

I am suggesting that one criterion for expertise is a record. A neophyte, by definition, cannot be an expert. One does not fight for a world championship his first time out. Most areas of expertise require training and practice; but I reject counting training and practice as expertise-proving criteria. An expert, a person who does

26 See, for example, Michael J. Saks, “Banishing Ipse Dixit: the Impact of *Kumho Tire* on Forensic Identification Science,” 57 *Washington & Lee Law Review* 879 (2000).

27 Joyce Wadler, “Living in Dust: Gut Renovation on the Cheap,” *New York Times* (on line), September 27, 2007. The on line version has a narrated before-after photo tour of their renovated apartment.

something well, should be able to prove it by doing it. If he can, then he must have had enough experience (at least the experience of doing whatever we are judging). Experience is necessary, but not sufficient, for expertise.

The consumer needs to be aware of phony ways to assert, to offer “proof” of expertise. A stock broker will call you, recommending that you buy Stock X. Two months later he calls you again. “Remember that stock X I told you about? It is up 20 percent while the market is flat. Sign up with me now to get more recommendations.” Why wouldn’t you?

You wouldn’t because, two months ago, the broker split his list of prospects into four parts. One he told to purchase X; the second he told to sell X short, it would fall; the third he told to purchase Z; the fourth he told to short Z. He might get nothing out of this, if they moved like the market, but he might come out with half of his list having been told about stock price movements different from the average. He knew nothing in advance. He called back only those to whom his predictions looked prescient. He will convince some people that his expertise has been “tested,” which is a step better than accepting expertise based on credentials. The test has to be real, however, and these never are.

A consumer needs to develop expertise in determining who is an expert in any service he intends to purchase. A voter needs to develop his own expertise to evaluate the mud tossed at us by aspiring politicians. We all know we have to do that in selecting doctors, although we do not all know how to go about it. We need that same skill for every selection we make: If not the skill to know what is best, the skill to know whom to trust to tell us what is best.

In fact, capitalism does not work to bring expertise to consumers, at least not easily. It is in the producers’ interest to keep the consumer uninformed. Would ingredients be on product labels if there were not a federal law requiring it? All theories extolling free-market capitalism *assume* a well informed and skilled consumer, yet all capitalists fight truth-in-advertising laws. No one says how, within that “free market” framework, the consumer would obtain that expertise she is assumed to have. We work around that flaw in the pure-capitalist model by imposing government as the protector of the safety of our food, children’s toys, and other products, and by requiring that drivers be licensed and insured against hurting you. We complain that government is “inhibiting” business, although at other times we understand that if it did not do so, this would be a much more dangerous world.

Another presumed source of protection for the information provided to consumers is “ethical standards.” Surely we recognize that when a voice we know—a movie star, radio or TV personality, politician, etc.—tells us that a certain product is something we should have, he has been paid to do so. When Judge Martin Feldman rules that the government cannot stop further drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico, we suspect that something is wrong. It turns out that a large part of his wealth is invested in oil drillers.²⁸ We like to think that there are ethical standards, and more importantly that those who base their decisions on the wrong factors, on self-aggrandizing factors, are punished. That seldom happens.

Two days after President Obama fired General McChrystal for airing his opinions about people and events, *The Washington Post* fired David Weigel for airing his opinions about the very conservatives, the “right wing,” he was assigned to cover. The *Post* was not angry at Weigel for publishing elsewhere (he had only written emails to people he thought were of a similar view). Like General McChrystal, he was fired for what he said, albeit, in Weigel’s case, privately. Apparently Weigel was not free to tell us what he really thought in his *Post* columns or, it turns out, anywhere. If Weigel really is an expert on the right wing—no one has said otherwise—the suppression of those opinions cannot be beneficial to the public.

We are systematically deprived of real expertise. I have no doubt that the government tried to retain General McChrystal in a lower position just to keep him quiet. President Obama not only did not want to hear what McChrystal had to say, he did not want *us* to hear it, either. And David Weigel was un-retained just to keep *him* quiet. That will not work.

The media world is changing. It is agonizingly slow, but truth is emerging, despite the interests that would suppress it. In 2013 we saw Edward Snowden unleash a series of stolen documents from the National Security Administration. For that, he has been called a traitor. Nothing Snowden has told us has turned out to be untrue. Nothing he has told us has been shown to have created any harm, although it surely created embarrassment.

The administration then released information it had held secret for years. Are the NSA personnel now releasing this information also traitors? Or should Snowden be seen as a hero, as prying open a door that should have been opened voluntarily?

28 See, for example, Jan Crawford, “Judge Slams Administration, Lifts Drilling Moratorium,” CBS News (on line), June 22, 2010. The decision is *Hornbeck Offshore Services v. Salazar*, 696 F.Supp.2d 627(E.D. La. 2010).

Whether he is a hero or not, Snowden is an expert who, despite Washington's attempt to shut him up, has shared his expertise with the public. That cannot be all bad, whereas the price he has paid for it is.

We are also seeing a new generation of columnists who are not afraid to express their opinions, backed with expertise and facts. Return here to consider the following after reading my discussion of economics, in the next chapter:

Interest rates are low, investors are clamoring to lend money to the United States and federal debt is projected to be a stable share of the economy over the next 10 years. This is a good time to borrow money and to spend the proceeds on useful highway construction.²⁹

Increase the federal deficit? "Burden" future taxpayers to pay for the improvements in the highways, from which they will benefit? Although he is a conservative (and often wrong—see Chapter 13), we hear none of the usual right-wing nonsense from Josh Barro (at least not this time). How did such clear thinking (and clear writing) get into the mainstream media?

Most of the experts from whom we need to hear cannot be silenced. The next "best" thing, from the establishment's view, is convincing us that they are not actually experts. They are bad people—don't listen to them. The administration then produces substitutes who, we are told, are the real experts. This is where the press should have a role. We need expertise at questioning these surrogates, expertise no one who gets to question them seems to have, or is willing to use.

You cannot trust what you hear from most economic or political or military "experts," because they have been taught that their real opinions, if they oppose the powers that be, will not be tolerated. Those who present their real opinions are decertified, while talk-radio hosts tell us that the certified experts, who in fact regurgitate only what is approved, are so expert that they should not even be questioned. We are left, so often, where we began this chapter, wondering how we can tell who really is an expert. If, as I contend, the real expert is eliminated from the start, then we can know that no one posing as an expert in a public forum is one. The answer to "how can we tell?" is simple: The so-called experts put forward by both sides in most debates are not expert at what they are debating. The real expert needs to be independent. No one will invite him/her.

29 Josh Barro, "Their Way or No Highway," *New York Times*, July 13, 2014.

Choosing The Subjects

Talk radio—America’s political conversation—is so insipid, I have argued, because talk radio hosts are not interested in exploring issues to get facts from real experts. Another problem with that conversation is that its topics are limited to those of the moment, those that gain public attention, which they do only from press attention. So, for example, “Bridge-gate,” the closing of some lanes of the George Washington Bridge for petty political reasons, raised questions about the way New Jersey’s governor, Chris Christie, operated. We do not know the extent to which Christie himself orchestrated, or even approved the lane closings. There is a larger issue here: How the New Jersey governor makes decisions—and how he lies about them. This is not how talk radio phrases its subjects.

For example, Christie was elected with a promise that he (as controller of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey) would not raise bridge tolls. So when he understood the “need” to raise those tolls (that is, the political need to increase state revenues while not increasing taxes), he arranged for the Port Authority to announce a large toll increase. Then he (and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo) criticized that proposed increase, said they used their authority to decrease it. In fact, the desired increase was \$4.00, the announced increase was \$6.00, and the “compromise” was \$4.50. Christie paraded as “fact” that he had lowered the toll, although he had colluded to increase it. Where was the press outrage? Where were the talk show hosts demanding more honesty from public officials?

Christie is an expert politician. He knows that the important outcome is the language associated with an act, not the act itself. So he manipulated the language associated with a toll increase to be about a toll decrease. As he is a national public figure, one might think the national press would take notice. It did not.³⁰

Although both the toll raise and the silence with which it was greeted (more importantly, with which its mis-characterization as a toll lowering was greeted), is disappointing enough, an earlier Christie decision is more troubling. After all, I do not know if the tolls should have been raised. What I know is that they were, for political reasons unrelated to any study of their cost, who would bear that cost, and “better” ways to raise revenue, if indeed more state revenue was required (as opposed to “desired”).

30 Kate Zernike and Matt Flegenheimer, “Even Before Fort Lee Lane Closings, Port Authority Was a Christie Tool,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2014. Three years after the toll raise, these authors had to explain Christie’s manipulations, which remained largely unknown even though they are typical of his administration.

The earlier decision, made on the same grounds (to find revenue without raising New Jersey taxes), was the scuttling of an already established construction project.

In 2010, Mr. Christie canceled construction on a planned railroad tunnel under the Hudson River that would have eased congestion for Amtrak and New Jersey Transit trains, and used \$1.8 billion that the Port Authority had planned to spend on it to fill the [New Jersey transportation] trust fund.³¹

Here is another single sentence description of this event:

In 2010, Chris Christie was able to cancel a new tunnel under the Hudson River more or less single-handed, even though more than a billion dollars had been spent on it.³²

The railroad tunnel, including entrances and exits on both sides of the Hudson River, connections to tracks on both sides, gaining rights of way and planning the mechanics of its construction, had been negotiated and agreed to by many agencies over many years. That the benefits would far exceed the costs had been calculated, and agreed to.³³ With the death of this tunnel project, all of that work would have to be done again. Surely such projects, providing a superior infrastructure for the future, are a proper function of government. Just as surely most of how Governor Christie spends money is not legitimate. Thus funds directed at relief from Hurricane Sandy surely should have been directed, for the most part, to coastal towns, which suffered the worst damage. But, to the extent that those towns had Democrat mayors who did not endorse Christie for governor, they were not fund recipients.

What we see on television is Governor Christie telling someone in a crowd, holding a sign that offended the governor, to put the sign away and shut up. One might contrast that reaction to President Obama's response to a crowd heckler, "Wait a minute. I'm coming to that." Apparently Christie has decided that being tough on his critics and handing out money to his friends is the path to greater political

31 Quotation also from Zemike and Flegenheimer's article. The *New York Times* editors referred to this diversion of funds as "the latest news." Really, an event that happened four years earlier? At least they had the good sense to describe the tunnel cancellation as "a huge mistake." See The Editorial Board, "Gov. Christie's Money Trail," *New York Times*, June 30, 2014.

32 James Surowiecki, "System Overload," *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2016 at 21.

33 That does not mean these cost-benefit analyses were correct. See Chapter 13 for reasons they might not have been. But in politics, agreement, not correctness, is the key. Christie offered no arguments against the tunnel project other than that he would have no control over those funds—already committed—whereas he would control funds in a Port Authority trust fund. If the \$4 billion new transit terminal at 1 World Trade Center is an example, then Christie should control nothing.

success. President Obama, in contrast, has decided that treating everyone with respect, even his hecklers, is the path to a more collaborative political system. As I will explain in the Epilogue to this book, economic development fails when it is directed by economic “experts.” What we need is public discussion, where views must be backed by logic and fact, not just well-heeled friends. Christie, who cares nothing for what kind of political system he is helping to create, as long as he succeeds in it, may well be correct. The kinds of actions that I consider outrageous may actually reflect political expertise. If I am writing in favor of true expertise, what is my problem?

My problem, and the reason this topic is in this chapter, is not with Chris Christie. It is with the American conversation, directed by talk radio and television news. Christie is a thug. If the public knowingly wants that kind of a governor, they can have him. If the public does not know, they cannot make that decision. Christie’s political success is built on arrogantly keeping the public ignorant. His disrespect of individuals extends to the work done in administrations preceding his to build a better functioning state. Lying about state actions, hardly unique with Chris Christie, should be fodder for political discussion. But the only act of the Christie administration that caught public attention was closing some lanes on a bridge, a more public act than most.

The problems in the Governor’s office are dwarfed by problems in the offices of the press. If we cannot always know what we should, we can always articulate what we should know, and ask why we do not. That would be a job for radio, television, and newspapers. Few in those fields see it that way.³⁴

Every public actor needs to be monitored. We count on the press to monitor them. We count on public conversation—no longer at town meetings, but on radio and TV—to bring our attention to relevant facts. To do so requires that members of the press have some expertise. Those people do not need to have been generals or former legislators or historians. They merely have to be good at what they do—and, of course, free to do it. Whether the people whose names we know, or those behind them, whose names we do not know, are at fault, I cannot say. The result is a misinformed and misled public. The American conversation is a vital part of our political system. The exclusion of experts—real experts—dooms it to incompetence.

34 Fortunately, a few lone voices do speak up. See Mark Bittman, “Christie’s Pig-Crate Politics,” *New York Times* December 3, 2014.