

Inquiring Minds topic – 25 January 2019

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Noblesse Oblige and Today's America

Initial questions for discussion are at the end of the topic paper (p. 6).

Why We Miss the WASPs

[nytimes.com/2018/12/05/opinion/george-bush-wasps.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/opinion/george-bush-wasps.html)

December 4, 2018 - by [Ross Douthat](#)

The nostalgia flowing since the passing of George H.W. Bush has many wellsprings: admiration for the World War II generation and its dying breed of warrior-politicians, the usual belated media affection for moderate Republicans, the contrast between the elder Bush's foreign policy successes and the failures of his son, and the contrast between any honorable politician and the current occupant of the Oval Office.

But two of the more critical takes on Bush nostalgia got closer to the heart of what was being mourned, in distant hindsight, with his death. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Peter Beinart described the elder Bush as the last president deemed “legitimate” by both of our country's warring tribes — before the age of presidential sex scandals, plurality-winning and popular-vote-losing chief executives, and white resentment of the first black president. Also in *The Atlantic*, Franklin Foer [described](#) “the subtext” of Bush nostalgia as a “fondness for a bygone institution known as the Establishment, hardened in the cold of New England boarding schools, acculturated by the late-night rituals of *Skull and Bones*, sent off to the world with a sense of noblesse oblige. For more than a century, this Establishment resided at the top of the American caste system. Now it is gone, and apparently people wish it weren't.”

I think you can usefully combine these takes, and describe Bush nostalgia as a longing for something America used to have and doesn't really any more — a ruling class that was widely (not universally, but more widely than today) deemed legitimate, and that inspired various kinds of trust (intergenerational, institutional) conspicuously absent in our society today.

Put simply, Americans miss Bush because we miss the WASPs — because we feel, at some level, that their more meritocratic and diverse and secular successors rule us neither as wisely nor as well.

Foer suggests this nostalgia is mostly bunk, since the WASPs were so often bigots (he quotes Henry Adams's fears of a “furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the ghetto”), since their cultivation of noblesse oblige was really all about “preserving [a] place at the high table of American life,” and since so many of their virtues were superficial, a matter of dressing nicely while practicing imperialism, or writing lovely thank-you notes while they outsourced the dirty

work of politics to race-baiting operatives.

“Those who are mourning the passing of the old Establishment should mourn its many failures, too,” he writes. Which is fair enough: The old ruling class was bigoted and exclusive and often cruel, it had failures aplenty, and as a Catholic I hold no brief for its theology (and don’t get me started on its Masonry).

However, one of the lessons of the age of meritocracy is that building a more democratic and inclusive ruling class is harder than it looks, and even perhaps a contradiction in terms. You can get rid of the social registers and let women into your secret societies and privilege SATs over recommendations from the rector of Justin and the headmaster of Saint Grottlesex ... and you still end up with something that is clearly a self-replicating upper class, a powerful elite, filling your schools and running your public institutions.

Not only that, but you even end up with an elite that literally uses the same strategy of exclusion that WASPs once used against Jews to preserve its particular definition of diversity from high-achieving Asians — with the only difference being that our elite is more determined to deceive itself about how and why it’s discriminating.

So if some of the elder Bush’s mourners wish we still had a WASP establishment, their desire probably reflects a belated realization that certain of the old establishment’s vices were inherent to any elite, that meritocracy creates its own forms of exclusion — and that the WASPs had virtues that their successors have failed to inherit or revive.

Those virtues included a spirit of noblesse oblige and personal austerity and piety that went beyond the thank-you notes and boat shoes and prep school chapel going — a spirit that trained the most privileged children for service, not just success, that sent men like Bush into combat alongside the sons of farmers and mechanics in the same way that it sent missionaries and diplomats abroad in the service of their churches and their country.

The WASP virtues also included a cosmopolitanism that was often more authentic than [our own performative variety](#) — a cosmopolitanism that coexisted with white man’s burden racism but also sometimes transcended it, because for every Brahmin bigot there was an Arabist or China hand or Hispanophile who understood the non-American world better than some of today’s shallow multiculturalists.

And somehow the combination of pious obligation joined to cosmopolitanism gave the old establishment a distinctive competence and effectiveness in statesmanship — one that from the late-19th century through the middle of the 1960s was arguably unmatched among the various imperial elites with whom our establishment contended, and that certainly hasn’t been matched by our feckless leaders in the years since George H.W. Bush went down to political defeat.

So as an American in the old dispensation, you didn’t have to like the establishment — and certainly its members were often eminently hateable — to prefer their leadership to many of the possible alternatives. And as an American today, you don’t have to miss everything about the WASPs, or particularly like their remaining heirs, to feel nostalgic for their competence.

The interesting question is whether they had to die off as they did. The decline of the old

establishment is often portrayed as a simple inevitability — with all those baby boomers storming the universities, all that demographic change sweeping away white Protestant America, how could the WASPs hope to preserve their rule?

Certainly something had to change. But along with the establishment failure in Vietnam, which hastened the collapse of the old elite's authority, there was also a loss of religious faith and cultural confidence, and a belief among the last generation of true WASPs that the emerging secular meritocracy would be morally and intellectually superior to their own style of elite. Thus under '60s mandarins like the Yale president Kingman Brewster the WASP ascendancy did not simply fall; it pre-emptively dissolved itself.

I'm not sure that self-abnegation has aged well. In any scenario the WASP elite would have had to diversify and adapt. But its virtues were to some extent transferable to a more diverse society: The establishment had always been somewhat permeable to arrivistes, Jews and Catholics imitated WASP habits in the 1940s and 1950s, and in our era their admirable influence is still felt in figures as different as Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

So it's possible to imagine adaptation rather than surrender as a different WASP strategy across the 1960s and 1970s. In such a world the establishment would have still admitted more blacks, Jews, Catholics and Hispanics (and more women) to its ranks ... but it would have done so as a self-consciously elite-crafting strategy, rather than under the pseudo-democratic auspices of the SAT and the high school resume and the dubious ideal of "merit." At the same time it would have retained both its historic religious faith (instead of exchanging Protestant rigor for a post-Christian Social Gospel and a soft pantheism) and its more self-denying culture (instead of letting all that wash away in the flood of boomer-era emotivism). The goal would have been to keep piety and discipline embedded in the culture of a place like Harvard, rather than the mix of performative self-righteousness and raw ambition that replaced them.

Such an effort might also have had spillover effects on politics. It's de rigueur for liberals to lament the decline of the Rockefeller Republicans, or the compromises that a moderate northeastern WASP like George H.W. Bush made with Sunbelt populism. But a WASP establishment that couldn't muster the self-confidence to hold on to Yale and Harvard was never likely to maintain its hold on a mass political organization like the G.O.P. Whereas an establishment that still believed in its mission within its own ivied bastions might have been seen as more politically imposing in the wider world — instead of seeing its last paladin, a war hero and statesman in a grand American tradition, dismissed in the boomer era as a "wimp."

The point of this counterfactual is not to just join the nostalgic chorus around Bush's departure for the Great Kennebunkport in the Skies. Rather it's to look forward, and to suggest that our current elite might someday be reformed — or simply replaced — through the imitation of the old establishment's more pious and aristocratic spirit.

Right now, almost all the discussion of our meritocracy's vices assumes the system's basic post-WASP premises, and hopes that either more inclusion (the pro-diversity left's fixation) or a greater emphasis on academic merit (the anti-affirmative right's hobbyhorse) will cure our establishment's all-too-apparent ills.

But nostalgia for what was best about the old establishment might point to a more radical theory of the case, one [proposed by Helen Andrews](#) in a 2016 Hedgehog Review essay on meritocracy and its discontents:

The meritocracy is hardening into an aristocracy — so let it. Every society in history has had an elite, and what is an aristocracy but an elite that has put some care into making itself presentable? Allow the social forces that created this aristocracy to continue their work, and embrace the label. By all means this caste should admit as many worthy newcomers as is compatible with their sense of continuity. New brains, like new money, have been necessary to every ruling class, meritocratic or not. If ethnic balance is important to meritocrats, they should engineer it into the system. If geographic diversity strikes them as important, they should ensure that it exists, ideally while keeping an eye on the danger of hoovering up all of the native talent from regional America. But they must give up any illusion that such tinkering will make them representative of the country over which they preside. They are separate, parochial in their values, unique in their responsibilities. That is what makes them aristocratic.

This idea is heresy to our current ruling class; it would have been simple wisdom to the WASPs. If we would learn from their lost successes in our own era of misrule, reconsidering this idea — that a ruling class should acknowledge itself for what it really is, and act accordingly — might be a fruitful place to start.



Let George H.W. Bush and the WASP Establishment Die - America can live without "noblesse oblige." - Views My Own, by [Harry Cheadle](#) - Dec 5 2018

When ex-President George H.W. Bush **died over the weekend**, it marked the symbolic, if bitterly contested, end of an era when national leaders were widely regarded as worthy of respect. **Many of the tributes** spoke of him as an "honorable" man who embodied "a 'kinder' and 'gentler' strain of Republicanism" than the one on offer today, **as the *New York Times* wrote**, echoing Bush's own rhetoric. If he was not your sort of hero personally, you might at least have seen in him qualities worth celebrating, from his service as a Navy pilot in World War II to his **restrained foreign policy as president** to his **commitment to working with Democrats**.

In many respects he was the best of the "establishment," a nebulous, shifting universe of highly educated, mostly white, mostly Christian, mostly straight male elites who have ruled the United States—in elected office and in other positions of power—for most of its history. In a *New York Times* column shooting around the internet at high velocity, **conservative Ross Douthat expresses the most nostalgic possible vision of what Bush the elder represented**: "a ruling class that was widely (not universally, but more widely than today) deemed legitimate, and that inspired various kinds of trust (intergenerational, institutional) conspicuously absent in our society today."

The column generated instant outrage when it dropped Wednesday morning because it's headlined "Why We Miss the WASPS" and because Douthat refers to the establishment by that old acronym. But Douthat also focuses on the stereotypical virtues of the WASP elite: "noblesse oblige and personal austerity and piety," along with "a spirit that trained the most privileged children for service, not just success" and a "cosmopolitanism" that allowed some elites to understand "the non-American world better than some of today's shallow multiculturalists." What Douthat is arguing for isn't the continued domination of white Protestants; he wants a diverse ruling class that retains the "more pious and aristocratic spirit" that gave us figures like Bush. It's not the worst vision of America, but it's incomplete and ultimately unimaginative.

In Douthat's telling, the WASPs simply gave up their grip on power, and that was probably a bad thing: "Along with the establishment failure in Vietnam, which hastened the collapse of the old elite's authority, there was also a loss of religious faith and cultural confidence, and a belief among the last generation of true WASPs that the emerging secular meritocracy would be morally and intellectually superior to their own style of elite." The problem is that Douthat glides rather glibly over all the ways this ruling class failed, again and again, until there was no reason for anyone—including its own members—to have faith in it. If the virtues of duty and service Douthat cites seemed a bit corny or cobwebbed, it's because it's difficult to fathom that anyone seeking power in America believes in them anymore.

If there was ever a place to debate elitism and privilege and power, it'd be the *Times* op-ed section. And the fundamental questions Douthat raises are good ones: When we talk about the people who rule the country (a separate, if overlapping, category from the people the country elects), what features do we want them to have? What makes an elite class virtuous? But when contemplating these questions, we should also grapple with the failures of the WASPs, and why the establishment collapsed in the first place.

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The Watergate scandal, a signature postwar sign that powerful people weren't especially competent or moral, was arguably handled by the establishment about as well as could be expected. Bush, who was chairman of the Republican National Committee at the time, defended Richard Nixon until deep into the saga, though he eventually urged the president **to resign**. But even if the post-Watergate era featured a host of **campaign finance and pro-transparency reforms**, elites didn't stop trying to hide unethical behavior. More than a decade later, the Reagan administration **sold arms to the Iranian regime** (in violation of an explicit Congressional ban) and **funneled the profits** to right-wing guerrillas in Nicaragua. The Iran-Contra scandal, as it was known, led to a years-long investigation that only ended when Bush, in arguably one of his worst moments, **pardoned six officials caught up in** it just before he left the White House. (The question of how closely Bush himself was involved in the affair **may never be answered**.)

The Reagan era provided Americans with more reasons to regard the ruling class with suspicion.

Thanks in part to the **anti-labor policies of Republicans**, real wages were **stagnant**, and have mostly remained so since. The country's WASP leadership often ignored problems facing people who didn't look or act like them, as the Bush administration did when it continued Ronald Reagan's legacy of **not reacting quickly or strongly enough to the AIDS epidemic**. The war on drugs, endorsed by leaders of both parties, **sent people of color to prison en masse**—Bush accelerated it, **calling for** “more jails, more prisons, more courts, and more prosecutors.” And neither party came out of the 90s looking especially virtuous—Bill Clinton lied about his affair with Monica Lewinsky, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich, his chief antagonist, **was carrying on an affair while going after Clinton** with puritan indignation.

The nadir of elite rule came under George W. Bush. If the younger Bush inherited any of his father's blue-blooded virtues, that didn't stop him from presiding over a disastrous war (backed by intellectuals from both parties), botching the response to Hurricane Katrina, and sitting there and watching as the economy imploded at the end of his term. The obstructionism and partisanship—in particular from the Republican side—that **marked the Obama era** didn't do much to reinvigorate people's faith in the country's leaders, either.

Maybe the elites involved in these scandals and failures of leadership had that sense of duty so highly praised by Douthat. Maybe too few of them did, and that was the problem. But it seems obvious in retrospect that as the WASPy establishment transitioned into a different, less old-world sort of power structure, it continued to ignore the concerns of many Americans, and many of its members were only interested in enriching themselves and retaining power. There's no evidence Americans would have been more trusting of their upper-class cousins had those elites hewn more closely to WASP values—the problem was that so many elites turned out to be corrupt, incompetent, or both.

As Donald Trump has demonstrated, anti-elitism alone won't fix America. Trump, despite his nod to old-world values with his odd fixation on **Ivy League credentials**, has merely replaced the establishment with a bunch of his family members and cronies, with predictable results. What the country needs is a new crop of leaders with a new set of values. This means a sense of public service and obligation rooted not in class privilege but in civic patriotism. This means a desire to root out corruption that is genuine enough to cut across party lines. This means a willingness to challenge authority as well as assume authority and make hard choices.

The fundamental point of Douthat's column is that there is such a thing as an American ruling class, and it "should acknowledge itself for what it really is, and act accordingly." He's correct about that—some people will always have more power than others to shape the future. But replicating a WASP value system that burnt itself out on a cocktail of foolish wars, corrupt dealings, and economic inequality is taking us in exactly the wrong direction. George H.W. Bush is dead. So is the world he came from. Let them die.

Please see the supplemental paper at www.shellpoint.info/InquiringMinds.

For discussion:

What do you think about Cheadle's critique of Douthat's article on the new establishment?

Is the use of the WASP designation helpful?

Does Douthat suggest any reasonable alternative to the demise of America's long-lived establishment?

Do you have any ideas for America's moving ahead?