

Bring On the Elites!

Why I want experts sitting on the Supreme Court. And remodeling my kitchen

By Joel Stein | Monday, Aug. 23, 2010

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I went to a better college than you did. That does not make me a better person than you. It does, however, make me smarter, more knowledgeable, more curious and more ambitious. So, in a lot of ways, better.

Though that may seem obvious, we in the academic elite don't bring up stuff like this often, because the income gap between us and everyone else has ballooned grotesquely, and we feel bad about it. Plus, as technology removes barriers to entry, the nonacademic elite has come to believe that because anyone can do anything, we are all equally skilled at everything. Bloggers opine about world politics on TV alongside members of the Council on Foreign Relations. On YouTube, \$100 million studio movie clips go up against guys crying over rainbows. More appalling, people demand that I read their e-mails, since I expect them to read my columns. This is like arguing that LeBron James has to play one-on-one with every NBA fan. In that analogy, I am LeBron James and the e-mail author is the NBA fan. I explain this only because you went to such a bad college.

[\(See pictures of the college dorm's evolution.\)](#)

The idea that we're all equally qualified is so widely accepted that when interviewing Vice President Joe Biden on the *Today* show about the nomination of Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court, Matt Lauer said, "Here's how the current bench will look. Five of the current Justices will be graduates of Harvard Law School. Three will be graduates of Yale Law School. Another will have gone to Yale Law School but graduated from Columbia ... Doesn't it sound a little elitist to you?" Undoubtedly, spell-check sounds a little elitist to you when an hour of your news program is anchored by Hoda Kotb and Kathie Lee Gifford.

I had assumed the Supreme Court was one of the places that needed to be elitist. Being a Supreme Court Justice isn't like being a community-college student or a Huffington Post columnist. The court is one of the few institutions in which people have to do some elite thinking. Have you ever read the Constitution? Of course you haven't: it's boring as hell. It's for nerds. It contains sentences like "No Bill of Attainder or ex post facto Law shall be passed." Now try to use that sentence to explain why gays should or shouldn't get married. You can see why you'd have to go to Yale Law for this.

[\(See pictures of Elena Kagan.\)](#)

This isn't the first time someone has made the antielitist argument about the court. When G. Harrold Carswell, a man who apparently could not spell either of his own names, was nominated by Richard Nixon, Senator Roman Hruska defended him by saying, "Even if he were mediocre, there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they, and a little chance?" I'm guessing Hruska was one of those kids who actually put his Little League participation trophy on top of his dresser.

The difference is that when Hruska said that, everyone immediately made fun of him, and Carswell lost the nomination. Forty years later, Lauer sounded reasonable. Even the Vice President didn't try to talk him out of it. We have elevated common sense above learned reason. Magazine editors and network executives make writers cut references and words they think most people won't know — even though everybody has Wikipedia. We are becoming a country that believes the rich have earned their money but the well educated have not earned their intellectual superiority. This leads to a nation that idolizes Kardashians.

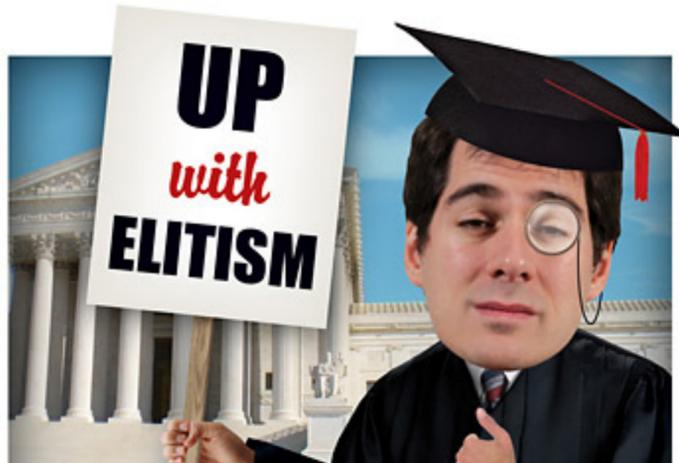


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Antielitism is a cancer waiting to metastasize in any democracy and one that Alexis de Tocqueville worried about for the U.S. Why do I bring this up? Because in any argument of any kind, elites always quote Tocqueville.

[\(See the top 10 Supreme Court nomination battles.\)](#)

Yes, it's unfair that so much of our future is determined by what we did in high school, as if we were some Soviet Olympic team. But until we come up with a better system, if I have brain surgery, I want it done by a doctor who went to an amazing medical school. Just like I want my Brazilian jujitsu instructor to have a red belt, my prisoners of war to be rescued by a Navy Seal and my technical-support phone operator to speak passable English. In fact, I wish more jobs had clear forms of elitism. Specifically, building contractors.

Teaching our children that we're all equally valuable, it turns out, was a stupid message. We have to go back to keeping the scores of kids' games and giving trophies only to the ones who win. I lost almost every game I played, and I didn't mind. You know why? Because I knew I'd be going to a better college than the other kids.

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