



## Separating political bias from academic expertise

### The role of public intellectuals

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In these loud and quarrelsome times consider the role of the public intellectual, particularly academics with a particular area of expertise they feel might elevate the debate on issues of the day outside the ivory tower.

One such academic is Richard Cherwitz, who's spent his career studying political rhetoric. As he prepares to retire from the **University of Texas at Austin** and take a brief break from a barrage of insightful op-

eds across the country—easily more than 150 published since the mid-1990s—it’s appropriate to acknowledge his and like-minded colleagues’ contributions.

Cherwitz describes his field as “as the bridge between theory and practice.” One recent example of his applying theory to the modern world is a piece that draws parallels between the alleged attacks on two tankers in the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Tonkin crisis almost 55 years ago.

Cherwitz notes that Lyndon Johnson’s rhetoric in that previous crisis, in which he advocated for an escalated U.S. military presence in the region, drew heavily from his State Department’s internal memos drafted before the crisis happened. As Cherwitz notes, both Johnson and the current president share a talent in using rhetoric both to gain public attention and shape the political narrative.

“There’s a myth inside and outside the academy that you are either a scholar-thinker or a doer,” he said. “I think that clearly is a mistake. It’s not an either-or choice. Academics must talk about what they know, not remaining sequestered in the alleged ivory tower.”

Conversations with some of Cherwitz’s colleagues at UT suggests that the level of approbation public intellectuals get inside the tower when they engage with the public depends on what department they’re in. Jeremi Suri, the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs at UT’s LBJ School, thinks it’s important for academics to enter the fray.

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“We’re in a moment where public intellectuals are more important than ever and in a sense making a comeback,” Suri said. People are seeing the limitations of politics and the passion in it. It’s become quite dangerous in our society. The fundamental thing that public intellectuals do is ring a thoughtful understanding to how things fit together. We don’t have silver bullet solutions, but we can see these connections. We help see order in the chaos. There’s a hunger for that.”

Suri sees Cherwitz as a “happy populist” and that comes through in his writing. He’s up-front about a president he regards with suspicion if not a little fear, but the bedrock of his analysis of what the president does and doesn’t say is analysis, not political bias. He makes his case with a provocative but calm tone, which seems to be a rarity of late.

“When a position is laid out clearly and cohesively and is backed by evidence or scholarship, it sticks in the brain and provides a counterpoint,” said Art Markman, the Annabel Worsham Centennial Professor at UT’s Department of Psychology. “And by having that counterpoint in mind it makes it easier to notice other things in the world that fit with this alternative view you might have discounted before. The effects of this kind of writing accrue over time.”

Anti-intellectualism has long been a force in American politics but it’s arguably not been as powerful, as virulent, as it is today since the 1950s. Cherwitz views his moonlighting as meeting an obligation to counter that. As a result, you’ll likely see his writing before long in media outlets across the country, aiming to make the world a little better one submission at a time.

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