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Allan Bloom Closing Of The American Mind

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The Enduring Provocation of Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind

Few books have ignited as much intellectual firestorm, praise, and outrage as Allan Bloom's **Closing of the American Mind**. Published in 1987, this dense, provocative work became an unlikely bestseller, spending months on the New York Times bestseller list and sparking a national debate about the very purpose of higher education, the state of the American soul, and the corrosive effects of moral relativism. To understand the book's lasting impact, one must look beyond the controversies it stirred and examine the core arguments that continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about culture, politics, and the life of the mind. The central thesis of Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind is that American universities have abandoned their foundational mission of seeking truth and cultivating wisdom, replaced by a shallow, intellectually bankrupt openness that closes the mind rather than opening it.

Who Was Allan Bloom?

Allan Bloom was not merely a professor; he was a devoted student of the Western philosophical tradition, a translator of Plato and Rousseau, and a disciple of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Born in 1930, Bloom spent much of his academic career at Cornell University, the University of Toronto, and finally the University of Chicago. His intellectual formation was deeply rooted in the "Great Books" tradition—the belief that the foundational texts of Western civilization contain timeless truths essential for a truly human life. When he wrote Allan Bloom Closing of the American Mind, he was not writing as a detached observer but as a passionate defender of an educational ideal he believed was being systematically dismantled.

The Historical Context of the 1980s

To fully appreciate the book, it is essential to recall the intellectual climate of the mid-1980s. American universities were in the throes of the "culture wars." Debates raged over the Western canon, multiculturalism, affirmative action, political correctness, and the very definition of knowledge itself. The **Closing of the American Mind**entered this fray with explosive force. Bloom argued that the university, once a sanctuary for the fearless pursuit of truth, had become a battleground for identity politics and a factory for producing graduates devoid of intellectual substance. He saw the student protests of the 1960s, particularly the student takeover at Cornell University in 1969, as a watershed moment when the university capitulated to raw political power rather than upholding its commitment to rational discourse.

The Core Argument: The Paradox of "Openness"

The most compelling and controversial element of Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind is his critique of

the modern concept of "openness." At first glance, openness seems like an unqualified good. Who would argue for a closed mind? Bloom, however, identified a dangerous paradox. The contemporary university preached openness as the highest virtue, but this openness was not a genuine willingness to learn from others. Instead, it was a dogmatic commitment to the idea that no way of life is better than another. This stance, which Bloom identified as radical relativism, effectively shut down the possibility of genuine inquiry.

If all values are equally valid, why study? Why argue? Why strive for virtue? Bloom contended that this relativistic openness was actually a profound intellectual closure. By refusing to make judgments of better and worse, true and false, noble and base, the modern mind had closed itself off from the very questions that make life worth living. The university, rather than being a place where students could grapple with life's deepest questions, had become a training ground for a sterile, value-neutral careerism. Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind is thus a lament for a lost world of intellectual seriousness, a world where books mattered, where students read with intensity, and where the pursuit of truth was the highest calling.

The Critique of the Sixties Generation

Bloom was particularly scathing in his assessment of the lasting damage wrought by the 1960s counterculture. He argued that the student movements of that decade, while ostensibly about freedom and liberation, actually introduced a new form of tyranny into academic life. The demand for "relevance" in the curriculum, the rejection of authority, and the celebration of raw instinct over reasoned argument all contributed to the intellectual decline he observed. In Allan Bloom Closing of the American Mind, he describes how the university's failure to resist these pressures led to a situation where the classical mission of the university—the cultivation of the mind through the study of great works—was replaced by a therapeutic model focused on self-esteem and political activism.

The Role of the Great Books and the Western Canon

Central to Bloom's vision of a proper education is the "Great Books" curriculum. He was a passionate advocate for the idea that students should wrestle directly with the foundational texts of Western philosophy, literature, and political thought. In his view, books like Plato's *Republic*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Rousseau's *Emile* were not merely historical artifacts. They were living dialogues that challenged readers to examine their own assumptions and pursue a more examined life. The abandonment of this canon in favor of more contemporary, ideologically driven texts was, for Bloom, a catastrophic intellectual failure. Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind argues that without the discipline of confronting these demanding works, students become intellectually flabby, unable to think critically about their own culture or any other.

The Rejection of Relativism

The philosophical heart of the book is a sustained attack on moral and cultural relativism. Bloom traces the roots of modern relativism back to German philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, whose ideas were popularized in American universities by way of European émigrés. He argues that this relativistic perspective has been so thoroughly internalized that students reflexively reject the notion of objective truth or universal moral standards. When faced with a question of right and wrong, the typical undergraduate, in Bloom's experience, would respond with a version of "Who am I to judge?" This reluctance to judge, which masquerades as tolerance, is in reality a form of intellectual cowardice. Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind insists that an education worthy of the name must involve making distinctions, defending positions, and engaging in the rigorous give-and-take of rational argument.

Declining Standards and the Crisis in the Humanities

Bloom's critique was not limited to philosophical trends. He also observed a concrete decline in academic standards and student preparedness. He lamented that students arrived at university increasingly ill-equipped for serious intellectual work. They had read fewer books, written fewer essays, and spent more time immersed

in popular culture. The university, instead of pushing back against this trend, often accommodated it by lowering standards, inflating grades, and offering courses that required little genuine effort. The result, according to Bloom, was a generation of graduates who had been cheated out of a real education. Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind paints a vivid picture of this academic wasteland, where the pursuit of knowledge had been replaced by the pursuit of credentials.

The Emphasis on Careerism over Learning

Related to the decline in standards is Bloom's critique of the vocational orientation of the modern university. He argued that higher education had increasingly become a mere stepping stone to a lucrative career rather than a transformative intellectual journey. Students were pressured to major in practical fields like business, engineering, or computer science, while the humanities—history, philosophy, literature—were marginalized as impractical luxuries. Bloom saw this as a profound betrayal of the university's true purpose. In Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind, he contends that the most important thing a university can do is not to prepare students for a job, but to prepare them for a thoughtful, examined life. The narrow focus on career preparation, he believed, left students spiritually and intellectually impoverished, even if they achieved material success.

The Book's Impact and Legacy

Upon publication, **The Closing of the American Mind**was a cultural phenomenon. It sold over half a million copies in hardcover and was discussed everywhere from faculty lounges to dinner tables to political talk shows. It became a rallying cry for conservatives who were alarmed by the leftward tilt of academia and the rise of political correctness. Simultaneously, it was attacked by liberals and progressives who saw it as a nostalgic, elitist, and racially insensitive defense of a dead white male canon. The controversy itself proved Bloom's point: the university was no longer a place of dispassionate inquiry but a political battlefield. Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind remains a touchstone in these debates, widely cited by those who criticize the current state of higher education.

Criticisms and Counterarguments

It would be remiss to discuss Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind without acknowledging its substantial criticisms. Many scholars accused Bloom of painting with too broad a brush, of romanticizing a past that never existed, and of ignoring the legitimate grievances of marginalized groups who had been excluded from the Western canon. Critics pointed out that the "great books" tradition itself was a relatively recent invention and that the university of the 1950s was far from a golden age of academic excellence, particularly for women and people of color. Others argued that Bloom's elitism was itself a form of intellectual closure—that his vision of education was available only to a privileged few and that it failed to engage with the rich intellectual traditions of non-Western cultures. Despite these valid criticisms, the book remains a powerful and influential provocation.

Relevance for the Contemporary Reader

More than three decades after its initial publication, the questions Allan Bloom raised in **The Closing of the American Mind**are perhaps even more urgent. The challenges he identified—hyper-partisanship on campus, the decline of the humanities, the fragmentation of knowledge, the dominance of identity politics, the corrosive effects of social media on attention and intellectual depth—have only intensified. Today's students are arguably more distracted, more anxious, and less equipped for sustained intellectual effort than ever before. The very idea of a shared truth or a common culture seems almost quaint. In this environment, Bloom's defense of the life of the mind, his insistence on the value of difficult books, and his warning against the dangers of unexamined relativism feel both nostalgic and desperately needed. Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind serves as a powerful cautionary tale about what is lost when we abandon the pursuit of truth for the comfort of conformity.

A Call to Reclaim the Mission

For those who care about the future of education, Bloom's book is not merely an artifact of the culture wars; it is a call to action. It invites us to ask fundamental questions: What is the purpose of a university? What does it mean to be an educated person? How do we cultivate the habits of mind necessary for a free and democratic society? These questions were central to Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind, and they remain central to any serious conversation about education today. Whether one agrees with Bloom's conclusions or not, his passionate defense of the intellectual life challenges us to think more deeply about what we are doing in our classrooms and why.

Conclusion

In the end, Allan Bloom's **Closing of the American Mind**is a deeply pessimistic book, but it is not a hopeless one. It identifies with searing clarity the intellectual and spiritual maladies of our time, but it also holds up a vision of what education could be. Bloom's critique of the modern university, of relativism, and of the loss of intellectual seriousness remains as relevant today as it was in 1987. The book is a powerful reminder that the life of the mind is not a luxury but a necessity for a free society. The closing of the American mind, as Bloom warned, is not an event but a process—one that must be actively resisted. By engaging with the arguments in Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind, we can begin the work of reopening minds to the enduring questions that make us fully human. The conversation he started is far from over, and it is one that every thoughtful person should join.

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