

Thoughtful thinking

Many problems are not fixable

By A.G. Gancarski

One of last year's must-read books in certain quarters of the latte-quaffing left was "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking" by current New Yorker scribe Malcolm Gladwell. The book's central contention, that humans historically have used intuition and "thin-slicing" quick thinking to solve seemingly complex problems, appealed to many educated types who seemingly saw Mr. Gladwell's overlong paean to the powers of snap judgments as an ode to the inherent wisdom of the common man.

Many vociferous adherents of the book wax about the success of Mr. Gladwell's techniques, but never really get around to discussing the book's singular failing. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein on Oakland, in "Blink," ultimately, there is no there there.

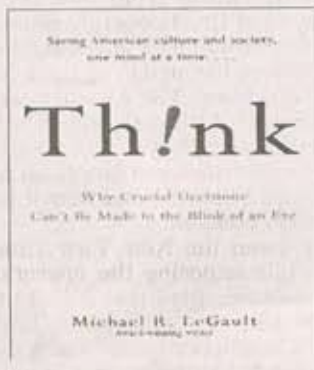
Of course people make snap judgments, often successfully. We see it everywhere in our culture, from Antiques Roadshow to blackjack tables. But what Mr. Gladwell glosses over is that such snap decisions are really the sine qua non of complex, even critical thinking processes. Though Mr. Gladwell's prose was engaging enough, his argument essentially leads us into the sort of anti-intellectual, faux-populist cul de sac so often favored on the left. And so, yet again, it is up to a writer on the right to correct the reductionism of a deadline hack of the left.

With such a corrective in mind, "Th!nk," by Michael R. LeGault, a former columnist for The Washington Times, could not have emerged at a better time. This first book from Mary Matalin's Threshold Editions press has many virtues — an able refutation of the excesses of Mr. Gladwell's 2005 best-seller, a fervent advocacy of the virtues of critical thinking, and — perhaps — a way out of the contemporary madness that privileges seductively subjective arguments over debates rooted in cold, hard, often uncomfortable facts.

Like Allan Bloom's "The Closing of the American

Mind," Mr. LeGault's book surveys the present and future consequences of the United States privileging subjective claims over objective realities. In embracing concepts like "instant gratification" and the en masse vertically imposed Ritalin habits of America's young, we are doing nothing short of building our own crypt as a culture and a nation.

"Th!nk" uses a tripartite



POLITICAL BOOKS

THINK

By Michael R. LeGault
Threshold, \$24.95, 355 pages

structure to address the concerns outlined above, and more besides, dealing sequentially with "Causes," "Inspirations" and "Fixes." Though the utility of that structure eluded this reviewer upon beginning this book, by the end it became clear that this organizational approach was necessary to illustrate the contemporary crisis, how far we have fallen from our ideals and what can be done to remedy the current situation.

"Causes" is the section of the book that most directly deals with the contentions made by Mr. Gladwell, outlined above. Here Mr. LeGault takes aim at many "sacred cows" of institutionalized liberalism, finding them not just intellectually wanting but spiritually corrosive. He sees fluid concepts like "information overload" and "stress," for example, as

excuses for behavior which are augmented by constant media reinforcement designed to convince people that those problems do exist.

"Inspirations" is the middle section of the book, the shortest, and possibly the one with the greatest amount of superfluous material. Here Mr. LeGault deals with great critical thinkers of history, but at times he goes too far, not accounting sufficiently for the role inspiration and "blink" logic might have played in the endeavors of such as Isaac Newton.

While Mr. LeGault does concede there are things like "creative frenzies" that allow people to transcend the strictures of formal logic in their thought, less certain is his appreciation that "snap decisions" often are the logical products of repeated similar processes of critical thinking. In this sense, Mr. LeGault finds himself making some of the same reductionist errors that Mr. Gladwell made in his book last year.

"Fixes" has a wistful quality, perhaps engendered by Mr. LeGault's keen understanding that America's problems perhaps are not fixable. After spending a couple of hundred pages reading about Ritalin zombies and their consumerist parents, who seem ill-equipped to embrace the contemplative, reasoned life, it is difficult to take completely seriously some of the proposed solutions to America's mental root-rot.

A proposal that high schools incorporate logic classes as part of the required curriculum sounds good, until one considers the totalitarian reality embodied in many of those bastions of adolescent warehousing. High-school students enjoy few freedoms, and in the grim context of public education it is difficult to imagine formal logic having a place in the curriculum.

Despite these qualms, the arguments within "Th!nk" merit consideration, especially by those concerned about America losing touch with its intellectual traditions.

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