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Egghead and Blockheads

By **MAUREEN DOWD**

WASHINGTON

THERE are two American archetypes that were sometimes played against each other in old Westerns.

The egghead Eastern lawyer who lacks the skills or stomach for a gunfight is contrasted with the tough Western rancher and ace shot who has no patience for book learnin’.

The duality of America’s creation story was vividly illustrated in “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” the 1962 John Ford Western.

Jimmy Stewart is the young attorney who comes West to Shinbone and ends up as a U.S. senator after gaining fame for killing the sadistic outlaw Liberty Valance, played by Lee Marvin. John Wayne is the rancher, a fast-draw Cyrano who hides behind a building and actually shoots Marvin because he knows Stewart is hopeless in a duel. He does it even though they’re in love with the same waitress, who chooses the lawyer because he teaches her to read.

A lifetime later, on the verge of becoming a vice presidential candidate, Stewart confesses the truth to a Shinbone newspaperman, who refuses to print it. “When the legend becomes fact,” the editor says, “print the legend.”

At the cusp of the 2012 race, we have a classic cultural collision between a skinny Eastern egghead lawyer who’s inept in Washington gunfights and a pistol-totin’, lethal-injectin’, square-shouldered cowboy who has no patience for book learnin’.

Rick Perry, from the West Texas town of Paint Creek, is no John Wayne, even though he has a ton of executions notched on his belt. But he wears a pair of

cowboy boots with the legend “Liberty” stitched on one. (As in freedom, not Valance.) He plays up the effete-versus-mesquite stereotypes in his second-grade textbook of a manifesto, “Fed Up!”

Trashing Massachusetts, he writes: “They passed state-run health care, they have sanctioned gay marriage, and they elected Ted Kennedy, John Kerry, and Barney Frank repeatedly — even after actually knowing about them and what they believe! Texans, on the other hand, elect folks like me. You know the type, the kind of guy who goes jogging in the morning, packing a Ruger .380 with laser sights and loaded with hollow-point bullets, and shoots a coyote that is threatening his daughter’s dog.”

At a recent campaign event in South Carolina, Perry grinned, “I’m actually for gun control — use both hands.”

Traveling to Lynchburg, Va., to speak to students at Liberty University (as in Falwell, not Valance), Perry made light of his bad grades at Texas A&M.

Studying to be a veterinarian, he stumbled on chemistry and made a D one semester and an F in another. “Four semesters of organic chemistry made a pilot out of me,” said Perry, who went on to join the Air Force.

“His other D’s,” Richard Oppel wrote in *The Times*, “included courses in the principles of economics, Shakespeare, ‘Feeds & Feeding,’ veterinary anatomy and what appears to be a course called ‘Meats.’ ”

He even got a C in gym.

Perry conceded that he “struggled” with college, and told the 13,000 young people in Lynchburg that in high school, he had graduated “in the top 10 of my graduating class — of 13.”

It’s enough to make you long for W.’s Gentleman’s C’s. At least he was a mediocre student at Yale. Even Newt Gingrich’s pseudo-intellectualism is a relief at this point.

Our education system is going to hell. Average SAT scores are falling, and America is slipping down the list of nations for college completion. And Rick Perry stands up with a smirk to talk to students about how you can get C’s, D’s

and F's and still run for president.

The Texas governor did help his former chief of staff who went to lobby for a pharmaceutical company that donated to Perry, so he at least knows the arithmetic of back scratching.

Perry told the students, "God uses broken people to reach a broken world." What does that even mean?

The Republicans are now the "How great is it to be stupid?" party. In perpetrating the idea that there's no intellectual requirement for the office of the presidency, the right wing of the party offers a Farrelly Brothers "Dumb and Dumber" primary in which evolution is avant-garde.

Having grown up with a crush on William F. Buckley Jr. for his sesquipedalian facility, it's hard for me to watch the right wing of the G.O.P. revel in anti-intellectualism and anti-science cant.

Sarah Palin, who got outraged at a "gotcha" question about what newspapers and magazines she read, is the mother of stupid conservatism. Another "Don't Know Much About History" Tea Party heroine, Michele Bachmann, seems rather proud of not knowing anything, simply repeating nutty, inflammatory medical claims that somebody in the crowd tells her.

So we're choosing between the overintellectualized professor and blockheads boasting about their vacuity?

The occupational hazard of democracy is know-nothing voters. It shouldn't be know-nothing candidates.