CHAPTER ONE – COMING TO AMERICA

The book opens with a quote from E.O. Wilson: “We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.” Zakaria was interviewed March 31 about this book shortly after its release. I have included some of the questions asked by Charley Rose and the answers given him and key ideas in chapter one.

1. In the Charley Rose interview Zakaria states, “The University is much more than a vocational school.” In chapter one of the book he elaborates, “the irrelevance of a liberal education is an idea that has achieved that rare status in Washington: bipartisan agreement.” Further, he cites states opposing liberal arts study. He writes, “The liberal arts are under attack. The governors of Florida, Texas and North Carolina have all pledged that they will not spend taxpayer money subsidizing the liberal arts.” Zakaria then goes on to say, “they seem to have a unlikely ally in president Obama.” Zakaria's inclusion of president Obama is based on a statement Obama made in early 2014 at a General Electric plant when he remarked "I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree."

Zakaria goes on to buttress his argument in chapter 1 with the following data: "The great danger facing American higher education in not that too many students are studying the liberal arts. In the 2011-12 academic year, 52 percent of American undergraduates were enrolled in 2 year or less than 2-year colleges and 48 percent were enrolled in 4-year institutions. At 2-year colleges, the most popular area of study was health professions and related sciences (23%). An additional 11.7 percent of students studied business, marketing and management. At 4-year colleges, the pattern was the same. Business accounted for 18.9 percent of students and health sciences was second with 13.4 percent. Another estimate found that only a third of all bachelor's degree recipients study fields that could be classified as the liberal arts and only 1.8 percent of all undergraduates attend classic liberal arts colleges."

He goes on to say, “It’s true that more Americans need technical training, and all Americans need greater scientific literacy. But the drumbeat of talk about skills and jobs has not lured people into engineering and biology – not everyone has the aptitude for science – so much as it has made them nervously forsake the humanities and take courses in business and communications. Many of these students might have been better off taking a richer, deeper set of courses in subjects they found fascinating – and supplementing it, as we all should, with some basic knowledge of computers and math., Zakaria also quotes Drew Faust, president of Harvard University. She states, “A university education is not meant to train you for your first job, it’s meant to train you for your sixth job.”

2. On the topic of his coming to America, Zakaria tells of his education in India in
the 1960’s and 1970’s when a skill-based education was seen as the only path to a good career. Jawaharlal Nehru became prime minister following India’s independence in 1947 and followed the plan of the Soviet Union in embracing technology to jumpstart its economic backwardness. They embraced 5-year economic plans and collaborated with Soviet advisors. It didn’t work and the 1970s was a tough decade for India economically and included a 2-year martial law period. In the Charley Rose interview and the book, Zakaria states why he came to America. “At age sixteen, we had to choose one of three academic streams: science, commerce, or the humanities. We all took a set of board exams that year – a remnant of the British educational model- that helped determine our trajectory. In those days, the choices were obvious. The smart kids would go into science, the rich kids would do commerce, and the girls would take the humanities. (obviously I’m exaggerating, but not by that much.) Without giving the topic much thought. I streamed into science. At the end of the 12th grade we took another set of exams. These were the big ones. They determined our educational futures.” Zakaria goes on to state that these tests focused on hard sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics.

3. Zakaria next spends time in chapter one on his parent’s education. He describes them as well paid professionals and he tells of his older brother Arshad who goes to Harvard after spending a ‘gap year’ between school and college waiting around to find out whether he got in anywhere. His mother, who is a journalist, writes an article for the ‘Times of India’ magazine entitled The Other America after visiting Arshad at Harvard. The article praises America and describes the United States as a land of amazing vitality and virtue. She wrote, “America is an open society as no other. So they expose their ‘failings’ too as no other. Americans cheerfully join in the talk of their own decline.”

An observation I glean at this point is in the nature versus nurture debate on human development. He was very fortunate in both areas. On the nurture he states, “India is one of the poorest countries in the world.” However, due to his social status, he fared well in getting his elementary and secondary education. On the nature side, he had the intellectual gifts to be able to choose between Princeton and Yale both of which had accepted him for admission. He chooses Yale on the power of intuition. He states, “Though obviously both are great institutions, Yale was the perfect place for me. I knew something at the time that I couldn’t explain or even understand.

4. Beginnings at Yale – Zakaria is accepted into a rigorous first-year academic program at Yale called Directed Studies. He states “it is a sweeping survey of the Western literary and philosophical tradition from ancient Greece to modernity.” He decides instead to sign up for courses that seem more sensible with the exception of one class on the history of the Cold War. He realizes that international politics and economics had always appealed to him. The class led him to the realization that he should take his passion seriously. He declares a major in the spring of his freshman year and is on his way to a liberal education. The career he now enjoys as a writer, journalist and international commentator probably would not exist without the spark lit by a political science professor. Zakaria ends chapter one by saying, “I was going to get a liberal education. But still, I couldn’t have answered the question, what is a liberal education?” Chapter two “A Brief History of Liberal Education’ examines this
CHAPTER TWO – A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

1. The Greeks in the 5th century BCE begin to experiment with a new form of government called Democracy. It puts power in the hands of the people. Because of this, citizens had to be properly trained to run their own society. A broad education and liberty were thus linked. Later, the Romans coined a term for it. Liberal education meant ‘of or pertaining to free men.’ Frederick Douglass saw the connection and states, “I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom.

2. A debate in ancient Greece ensued between those who understand liberal education as instrumental (Isocrates) with a focus on the arts of rhetoric, language, and morality and those who saw education as an end in and of itself (Plato and Aristotle). They considered education as a search for truth.” The instrumental side won. However, as Rome superseded Greece in the ancient world, voices such as Cicero wanted to combine the search for truth with the practical. Specifically rhetoric. Zakaria concludes that this practical versus philosophical debate continues, but “the reality is that liberal education has always combined a mixture of both approaches. In the first century BCE, this dualistic approach to education was finally and definitively formalized into a system described as ‘the seven liberal arts.’ The curriculum was split between science and humanities, the theoretical and the practical. Centuries later, it was often divided into two subgroups: the trivium – grammar, logic, and rhetoric and was taught first; the quadrivium – arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy came next.”

3. Later Developments
   A. During the Dark Ages, medieval monasteries kept alive a tradition of learning and inquiry.
   B. Islam, the most advanced civilization in the Middle Ages (something difficult to imagine today) has dozens of madrasas where many subjects are studied and where research was pursued. Not all Islamic educational institutions were called madrasas. Islamic learning produced innovations, especially in the study of mathematics.
   C. Italy became a place where commerce, trade and capitalism were beginning to stir. The first University was founded in Bologna in 1088. Over the next century similar institutions began and by 1300 Western Europe was home to between 15 and 20 universities. Most research takes place outside of universities in those days because of their religious influence. It was heretical, for instance, for scientists to speculate on earth’s place amid the stars.
   D. Colleges grew more secular by the 19th century as seminaries assumed responsibility for training ministers. The colleges also became residential and this idea spread to the Anglo-American world where it remains the distinctive form for undergraduates. An emphasis on building character, stemming from the religious origins of colleges, remains an aim of liberal arts colleges almost everywhere, at least in theory.

4. Zakaria discusses the influence of Charles Eliot’s 40 years as Harvard president.
He contrasts it with that of Princeton president James McCosh and also Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago. Eliot believed in the elective system and McCosh believed the faculty should choose ‘the furniture of the mind’ which would expand its powers as well as storing it with knowledge. Eliot wanted the great universities to “embrace the research function, but do so at the graduate level, leaving undergraduates free to explore their interests more broadly.” Eliot’s system came to dominate American education, with a few notable exceptions. The McCosh, Hutchins and Adler ‘Great Books’ approach continues to be debated. Zakaria relates to this using the term ‘common core’. The common core liberal arts curriculum remains central to programs at Columbia and the University of Chicago as well as St. John’s College at Annapolis and at Santa Fe. I have experienced a segment of the ‘Great Books’ program at the Santa Fe campus of St. John’s College and I, like Zakaria, “place a greater value on the openness inherent in the Eliot electives model which allows for the mind to range widely and pursue interests freely while also sympathizing with the arguments in favor of a core.”

5. Zakaria includes in this chapter his musings on the following topics: (A) Modern entertainment turning something that demands active and sustained engagement, like reading and writing, into a chore. (B) The question of whether research has trumped teaching in most large universities (C) The possibility that more specialized knowledge has led to the courses being offered to students becoming more arcane (D) causes and consequences of what has come to be known as ‘grade inflation.’ (E) The role of science and whether it has ceased to have much to contribute to the search for an answer to the question of the meaning of life. He references this as the ‘two cultures’ polarization of knowledge

6. The chapter concludes with Zakaria discussing the Yale and National University of Singapore becoming a joint College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The program combines eastern and western thought with an emphasis on method of inquiry. In history, politics and economics it has a comparative approach. He refers to this program as a genuine multicultural education for the emerging multicultural world. This program idea was introduced in 2011 when Zakaria was a trustee at Yale. The program begins in 2013 with a first class of 157 students from 26 countries. Being in the formative stages it is only a conceptual model of education. Zakaria comes back to it later in the book as it embodies his ideal of the breadth and depth of liberal education as he envisions it. He concludes the chapter by asking the question, “So, what is the earthly use of a liberal education?” This leads in to chapter 3 which is entitled ‘Learning To Think’.

CHAPTER THREE – LEARNING TO THINK

1. Strengths of liberal education that Zakaria sees as keys to learning how to think are: how to write (the central one), how to speak (rhetoric) and how to learn (the understanding of how to acquire knowledge on your own). He sites an examples of this being the skill of reading a book fast and still getting its essence. He concludes “most of all, I learned that learning was a pleasure – a great adventure of exploration.
2. The Lasting Value of A Liberal Education - “The constant that remains after college are the skills you acquire and the methods you learn to approach problems. You will need to apply these skills to new challenges all the time.”

3. The 8 varieties of intelligence – the work of Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist is cited. Gardner argues that in the future, students will focus even more on modes of thinking. After all, with facts being just a Google search away, why waste brain cells memorizing them. Zakaria goes on to cite CU’s Thomas Cech who writes, “a liberal arts education encourages scientists to improve their ‘competitive edge’ by cross-training in the humanities or arts. Such academic cross-training develops a student’s ability to collect and organize facts and opinions, to analyze them and weigh their value, and to articulate an argument, and it may develop these skills more effectively than writing yet another lab report.”

4. The Creative Economy- "Technological education and liberal education go hand-in-hand." Zakaria cites Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, who says "Facebook is as much psychology and sociology as it is technology." To further buttress his argument on the creative economy Zakaria states “the American Association of Colleges and Universities published a survey in 2013 which showed that 74 percent of employers would recommend a good liberal education to students as the best way to prepare for today’s global economy. You can make a sneaker equally well in many parts of the world. But you can’t sell it for $300 unless you have built a story around it. This creative economy is about creativity, imagination, and, above all, innovation.”

5. A talent Meritocracy vs. an exam meritocracy- Zakaria asks why Asian countries which score well on international exams don’t do especially well at innovation - so far. He states: Despite typically topping the international test charts they don’t end up producing the world’s most creative scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors, composers and businesspeople. The minister of education for Singapore tells him, "the U.S. is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. There are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well - like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition and a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom." Zakaria, in response to this, notes three countries that do not do well on the International Student Assessment Test (PISA). This test is often used for international test comparisons and Zakaria states that the three countries that fare poorly on this test, the United States, Sweden and Israel are real-world successes. He states, "they are all open societies, happy to let in the world's ideas, goods and services, and they are all places where people are confident (a characteristic that can be measured)." He nails down his point by stating, "Good test scores are not enough to create the next Google."

6. Inequality and Liberal Education - Zakaria writes: "the French economist Thomas Piketty acknowledges that the best approach to reducing inequality in the long run is widening access to good education. Piketty writes that the main force in favor of
greater equality has been the diffusion of knowledge and skills. The U.S. appears by many measures to be headed toward greater inequality rather than greater equality.

7. Zakaria next spends a few pages on problems in higher education that he sees as flaws that undermine the idea of merit and the discipline of academic work which undergird a liberal education that is structured and demanding. Among the problems he cites are the industry of ‘amateur’ sports consuming a massive amount of time, money, and attention. He also cites diminishing work levels by students and low standards.

8. ‘More Like Us’ – Zakaria concludes this chapter by referring to a book by this title written by the journalist James Fallows which suggests emphasizing the distinctive strengths of the United States – its openness, innovation, decentralization, laissez-faire attitude, and entrepreneurial culture – but to do so even better than in the past. The solution to the problems of a liberal education is more – and better – liberal education.