

NEWS

National Endowment
for the Humanities

A Federal Agency

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File
NEH

"BEYOND THE CULTURE WARS"

by SHELDON HACKNEY

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National Press Club
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Remarks of Sheldon Hackney
Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
at the National Press Club
November 10, 1993

What we think about ourselves, what we see as admirable behavior, what we think it means to be human, what we recognize as the human condition, what we learn from human experience and human thought, what we accept as the purpose of life, what we define as a just society, what we decide we owe to each other, what we understand as the way the world works are not simply matters of idle curiosity but fundamental determinants of our existence. The humanities matter. They are important to everyone.

They are so important that the federal government needs to foster their development and insure their broad availability. That is the genius of the vision of Senator Claiborne Pell and Senator Jacob Javits and Senator Edward Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson and the other founders of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965, and it has been the inspiration of the nurturers of that vision in the succeeding twenty-eight years. What we think determines what we do, and what we think (even about the values we hold dear) will be enormously improved if it is informed by knowledge and disciplined thought by the study of History and Philosophy and Literature and Religion.

That is what Maya Angelou had in mind in her inaugural poem last January when she rephrased George Santayana: "History, despite its wrenching pain,/ Cannot be unlived, but if faced/

With courage, need not be lived again." The same theme was struck by President Clinton in his dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in April. After enumerating some of the evil forces loose in the world that threaten civilization with brutality just as the Nazis once did, the President exhorted us all to be vigilant against the falsifiers of history, "With them we must all compete for the interpretation and the preservation of history, of what we know and how we should behave."

I begin with these powerful sentiments because I believe that I am joining a distinguished tradition at the NEH at a particularly critical juncture in the nation's history when the benefits of the humanities are especially important. Let me explain.

Last week (November 3, 1993) Mark Shields in his newspaper column reminded us of the current cynicism of the American public, or more precisely the lack of confidence that the public has in the national government to handle our domestic problems adequately. One can think of a lot of reasons for the public to be in an anxious mood these days, but as Mr. Shields points out, the decline in public confidence began more than two decades ago, sometime in the 1960s.

My own understanding of this worrisome phenomenon is helped by realizing that it is not simply the national government that has slipped in the estimation of the American public, but that public confidence in all American institutions has declined. I

used to take a smidgeon of perverse pleasure as a university president in the fact that universities ranked higher in the public's estimation than our chief tormentors, the Congress and the press, but the grim truth is that levels of confidence in the institutions of American life rise and fall together, and the secular trend line for more than the last two decades has been down.

Just before the election (October 31, 1993 in the Washington Post), Kevin Phillips wrote about voter hostility towards elites of all kinds, about popular opposition to NAFTA as being a matter of suspicious locals versus arrogant globals who are out of touch with mainstream America, and about ethnic and racial tensions throughout the country. The off-year elections confirmed this diagnosis of anger and volatility in the public mood.

Why the cynicism? Why the insecurity? Why the alienation? The short answer is that the new geopolitical forces of the still evolving "new world order," and the newly visible economic forces of the global marketplace are battering a society whose bonds of social cohesion have been loosening for a quarter of a century or more. This is not the place to try to explain in detail the fundamental economic, demographic and social forces that have an atomizing effect on society, but they are real and they have been acting over a long period of time. In addition, the basic confidence and optimism thought to be embedded in American national character were dealt severe blows in the early 1970s by the loss of the war in Vietnam, the disgrace of the presidency in

the Watergate scandal, and the economic shock of the Arab oil embargo which was perhaps the first painful message that our economy was vulnerable to developments and decisions in the world economy over which we had no control.

Into this condition of attenuated solidarity, "the politics of difference" have introduced another lever of fragmentation. During the turbulent decade of the 1960s, almost all the values and verities of middle-class life were challenged by the counterculture, leaving the domain of values a contested territory. The cultural consensus of the 1950s was destroyed in the process, and we have not yet fully developed a new consensus.

In addition, the successful civil rights movement provided a paradigm of progress through protest. Movements on behalf of other groups that had been excluded from full participation in American life (women, gays and lesbians, the handicapped, native Americans, Latinos, and to some extent Asian Americans) adopted that paradigm.

Then, the collapse of the Soviet system, while lifting our spirits in hopes for the spread of human freedom, has also unleashed pent up ancient animosities. Around the globe we see conflict and violence sowing misery along the fault lines of race, religion, language and ethnicity -- just the sorts of divisions being brought to our attention by the politics of difference and by the increasing cultural diversity of our population. As the insecurities of a rapidly changing world are luring Americans and others into clutching and reasserting their

parochial identities, Americans must wonder if Bosnia and Azerbaijan are previews of our future.

Several weeks ago (October 17, 1993) The New York Times published a feature article by William Grimes entitled "Have a #%!&\$! Day" about the rising tide of incivility engulfing the country. From Howard Stern to Beavis and Butthead, we are assaulted daily by countless acts of public rudeness. Among the cultural roots of this phenomenon, Mr. Grimes focuses on cultural diversity. "New Yorkers have never been terribly civil," he quotes a professor of the humanities at Cooper Union as saying, "but it never had an ideological edge, which it now has." Mr. Grimes goes on to quote the same professor approvingly in his critique of the "new tribalism": "If we have fundamentally different values and assumptions, there's no reason to believe we can transcend them in the political arena. . . . Multiculturalism argues that persuasion is irrelevant."

Small wonder that reasonable voices have lately been saying that we have been paying too much attention to our differences and not enough attention to the things that hold us together. From the other direction, however, we continue to hear assertions of what Charles Taylor refers to as "the politics of recognition," the notion that there are still disadvantaged groups in America whose members will never feel equal or really part of America until their group is recognized in some way as being legitimate and equal. There is truth in both of these positions.

We find ourselves caught in a dilemma. All of our legal rights are universal in nature and apply equally to all citizens as individuals. Yet, we know that racial, ethnic, gender and religious discrimination exists, and that group identities are real factors in our lives. Ethnic politics has been a staple on the American political scene for more than a hundred years and is still very much present in our system. The dilemma is that our legal rights are for individuals, but our politics are for groups.

That this is more than an academic argument is clear if one recalls the hand-to-hand combat of school board battles involving such issues as bilingual education or Afrocentric curricula, the dispute over the literary canon at the college level, or the court decisions seeking to remedy past patterns of discrimination in voting rights cases by requiring redistricting or changes in the form of local government so as to guarantee the minority community representation on the legislative body. In each of these cases, and others you can probably think of, public authorities are being asked to confer some sort of official status on a particular cultural group. Large parts of the public sense that this form of particularism is a problem in a system based on universal values of individual rights. Simply saying that everyone must respect everyone else's ethnic identity therefore does not solve the problem.

Yet, a solution must be found if we are to recapture a confident sense of shared values that will let us then deal with

divisive public policy issues with a common goal in mind. What is needed in our country is nothing short of a national conversation about this difficult and troubling dilemma. All of our people - left, right and center - have a responsibility to examine and discuss what unites us as a country, about what we share as common American values in a nation comprised of so many divergent groups and beliefs. For too long, we have let that which divides us capture the headlines. Current public debate is little more than posturing. Bombarded by slogans and epithets, points and counterpoints, our thoughts are polarized in the rapid-fire exchange of sound bites. In this kind of argument, one is either right or wrong, for them or against them, a winner or a loser.

Real answers are the casualties of such drive-by debates. In this kind of discussion, there is no room for complexity and ambiguity. There is no room in the middle. Only the opposite poles are given voice. This may be good entertainment, but it is a disservice to the American people. It only reinforces lines of division and does not build toward agreement. I want to change the rules of engagement for this national conversation.

This is to be a national conversation open to all Americans, a conversation in which all voices need to be heard and in which we must grapple seriously with the meaning of American pluralism. It is a conversation that is desperately needed, and I believe the National Endowment for the Humanities can stimulate and facilitate the discussion. The NEH will not bring answers, but we will bring questions.

To be sure, the NEH has other important tasks. As the single most important source of support for the humanities in American life, receiving approximately 9,000 applications per year and dispensing \$150 million in about 2,000 grants, we have a major role to play in assisting in the creation of new knowledge, translating knowledge in the humanities into educational experiences both formal and informal, and in extending the reach of humanities programs to embrace many more Americans so that they may benefit from the transforming power of the humanities in their everyday lives.

We will continue to support individual scholars both in the academy and outside; we will continue to bring high school and college teachers together on university campuses for summer seminars that refresh and reinvigorate them; we will continue to support programs in museums and libraries and archives where our cultural heritage is preserved, used for public programs, and made available for study; we will continue to fund excellent programs through the mass media, such as Ken Burns' documentary on the Civil War and Henry Hampton's series on the Great Depression; and we will work with renewed enthusiasm with state humanities councils to enlist more Americans in humanities activities, be it reading and discussion groups or Chautauqua or communities recording and telling their own story, connecting individuals and groups with the broader context of human experience so that they become the subjects of history rather than its objects.

With some of our time and energy, however, and a little bit of our money, we will conduct a national conversation. I have been pleased to discover that numerous programs sponsored by state humanities councils have already started people talking to each other about who we are as a nation and what holds us together. The projects have taken many forms: small town residents and farmers gathering under Chautauqua tents in North Dakota or Wyoming exploring American democracy and the ideas of Thomas Jefferson; citizens in Florida meeting to explore "The Search for the Common Good," Californians reading and discussing serious essays on the topic of "Longing for Community: Dream or Nightmare"; or hundreds of Iowans meeting to explore religious pluralism in a program called "Faith and Politics: American Pluralism, Can We Live Together?"

I am encouraging the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the individual state councils to intensify their pursuit of the theme and to explore it in programs of their own devising. I will set aside a modest but significant amount of money for an Endowment-wide initiative that can respond to competitive proposals from around the country -- from state councils, from libraries, museums and archives, from schools, colleges and universities, from centers and institutes.

I am also delightfully aware that a number of scholars from various disciplines and many different points of view have been thinking and writing about the subject of this national conversation over the past two or three years. The MacArthur

Foundation has agreed to be an early partner in this enterprise by bringing together a group of these already engaged scholars to talk to each other. Out of that small discussion, and others that are already going on at the local level, we will gain some insights into different aspects of the subject, into how to phrase the questions productively, into what sorts of materials stimulate the most fruitful discussions, and into the range of possible answers. I imagine that, after some experience, we will be able to conduct this conversation through mass media formats. This is an exciting undertaking for the NEH and for the country.

My own notion of the meaning of American pluralism is still evolving, and in any case is certainly not prescriptive, yet it might help for me to sketch some elements of it here. My answer has as its preface a belief that there is an American identity that is different from the identities of any one of the ethnic groups that comprise the American population, that is inclusive of all of them, and that is available to everyone who is American. It is an identity that has been shaped by the buffeting and melding of individuals and groups in North America over the last three hundred years.

I believe that the most important thing that we share as Americans is a belief in our political system, in the values that are enshrined in the Constitution, and in the open democratic system for determining who makes and enforces the laws, and that the laws should be consistent with those principles.

Further, in the land of opportunity, we believe in equal

economic opportunity for individuals. We know that we do not provide perfect equality of opportunity, but it is an ideal that we hold dear, and we have historically provided enough opportunity to keep individual hope alive and to maintain faith in the ideal.

We also have a history that belongs to all Americans, whenever their ancestors happened to have migrated to these shores. That history is a proud one, but it has some dark spots, and we must come to terms with those imperfections as well as the glories. I am a white southern male, but I claim as part of my own story the experiences of Italians and Irish and Jews coming into America through Ellis Island in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the experiences of African Americans who lived in the South with my ancestors and saw it from their own point of view, or more recently the experiences of South Asians and Latinos. My story should be theirs as well, and we all possess together the national story, the resultant of many different vectors, the story of our being able to find solutions, to rise to historical challenges, and find ways to transform particular interests into the national interest.

Beyond these fundamental building blocks, there are certain precepts that might help us as we go through the discussion of what it means to be American. The traditional way of handling cultural differences has been to think about a public sphere and a private sphere. In the public sphere only universalistic rules are legitimate and only individual rights are legally protected.

In the private sphere, we can give voice and form to our birthright identities without being any less American. This distinction still goes a long way in sorting out the conflicts between the universal and the particular.

Indeed, if there is no distinction between the public and the private, all values would be up for political adjudication, and that is not a system I find very attractive. One of the factors causing the current sense of urgency about this subject is the feeling that the public or political sphere has been encroaching on the private sphere. "Let your culture be your politics", the cultural radicals of the 1960s chanted. "All politics are personal, and all personal relationships are political", assert some contemporary activists. Where in all of this are the ordinary virtues that we ought to be able to expect from each other? Perhaps they can emerge from the conversation.

It helps also to realize that all ethnic groups have permeable boundaries, and that the meaning of any particular identity will change over time. What it felt like to be a white Southerner in 1865 is different from what it felt like in 1950 and it is different again today. What it means to be a Jew in America is different today from what it was in 1940. History has a way of changing who we think we are.

The subject is elusive, but it is very important. If the conversation works well, we will stake out some common ground, and by doing that we will make it possible to celebrate more fully the variations among us that play against each other and

reinforce each other to produce a dynamic national identity. As President Clinton said in a different context at the dedication of the Holocaust Memorial Museum, "We must find in our diversity our common humanity. We must reaffirm that common humanity, even in the darkest and deepest of our own disagreements."

In that spirit, I am looking forward to this conversation among the American people. In that spirit, I challenge you to help focus the attention of the American people on this quest for the meaning of E Pluribus Unum.

A NATIONAL CONVERSATION
AMERICAN PLURALISM

DRAFT
IN PROGRESS
1/31/94

Introduction

The National Endowment for the Humanities intends to conduct a national conversation on the nature of American Pluralism. It is designed to engage a significant proportion of the American people in discussions about such questions as, "What does it mean to be an American? What holds us together? What do we value? The conversation will be launched in the summer or early fall of 1994 and will last approximately two years.

The conceptualization and planning will be conducted from January through April 1994. Information and advice will be obtained through a series of discussion meetings with NEH staff, scholars and citizens from diverse backgrounds throughout the country, as well as focus groups. Two major meetings will be held in March, both to assess the findings of these groups and to develop plans on the conceptualization and implementation of this initiative. One, to be held in Chicago, will include scholars who have thought and written about this topic. The other, to be held in Washington, will include public humanities professionals and scholars who have participated extensively in public activities.

The conversation, as currently conceived, would have three major types of activities: 1) those conducted directly by the Endowment, such as commissioning the production of a film and the publication of printed materials; 2) those funded by the Endowment, both through a special competition in the Division of Public Programs and an agency wide special initiative calling for applications on the topic in all divisions; and 3) related activities funded and conducted by other groups and institutions.

The principal components of the plan are listed below.

Components and Responsibilities

1. Scholars' Group (Chicago) -- Don Gibson
to define the questions and identify the printed materials
2. Public Humanities Group (Washington, D.C.) -- Sondra Myers
to examine and advise the Endowment on implementation methods

3. NEH Staff Discussions -- Candace Katz
to experiment with various approaches to discussing American pluralism and to gather information for subsequent planning.
4. Pilot Citizens' Groups -- Martha Chowning
to experiment with various approaches to discussing American pluralism and to gather information for subsequent planning.
5. Focus Groups -- Jeff Thomas
to examine more scientifically the types of questions, topics and approaches that would engage the American public in a conversation on American Pluralism.
6. Public Programs' Initiative -- Marsha Semmel
to plan and implement a special competition, with a Request for Proposals, on American Pluralism. It would be designed to have a national impact.
7. NEH Initiative -- Candace Katz
to plan and implement a special initiative for NEH, inviting proposals in all programs.
8. Telecommunications -- Ann Young
to commission the production of a film and to plan other means of using telecommunications, e.g., electronic townmeetings.
9. State Councils -- Carole Watson
to design a special collaboration with state humanities councils and the Federation on the conduct of the conversation.
10. Partnerships -- Martha Chowning
To encourage, directly and indirectly, activities funded and conducted by other agencies and groups.
11. Foundations -- Sondra Myers
To solicit the financial and operational assistance of foundations.
12. Printed Materials and Publicity -- Gary Krull
To write and produce the "kit," printed materials for the national conversation, including a bibliography.
13. Promotional Tour -- Gary Krull
To plan and conduct a series of city and community-wide activities at selected sites throughout the nation in the early fall 1994.
14. The White House -- Martha Chowning
To seek the participation of the White House in Conversation activities.

15. The U.S. Congress -- Ann Young
To seek the participation of the Congress and members
of Congress in Conversation activities.
16. Other Federal Agencies -- Sondra Myers
To seek the participation of other Federal agencies in
Conversation activities.

Public Humanities Group

Task	Project Director	January	February	March	April
		1 15 31	1 15 28	1 15 31	1 15 30
Identify and Recruit Participants (1/31)		----->			
Arrange Logistics--meeting time and place (2/4)		----->			
Send Letter to Participants Outlining Concept and Process (2/8)		----->			
Determine Agenda and Advance Reading Materials (3/10)		----->			
Mail Meeting Materials to Participants (3/14)		----->			
Telephone Calls to Determine that Materials Were Received and Answer Any Questions (3/17-18)		----->			
Conduct Meeting (3/24-25)		----->			
Produce Transcripts, Executive Summaries, and Reports (3/31)		----->			

---- Projected Completion Date
 ==== Actual Completion Date

Scholar's Group

Task	Project Director	January	February	March	April
		1 15 31	1 15 28	1 15 31	1 15 30
Identify and Recruit Participants (1/7)		---->			
Send letter to Participants Requesting Bibliography by 1/28 (1/10)		----->			
Determine Agenda, Printed Materials and Logistics (2/7)		----->			
Mail Materials to Participants (2/11)		----->			
Call Each Participant to Determine if Materials Received; Determine if Any Questions or Suggestions (2/21-23)		----->			
Conduct Meeting (3/4-6)		----->			
Complete Transcriptions, Executive Summaries & Reports (3/11)		----->			
Write the "National Materials (4/4)		----->			
Announce Conversation Nationally (4/?)		----->???			

----- Projected date
 ===== Actual completion date

Endowmentwide American Pluralism Initiative

Task	Project Director	January 1 15 31	February 1 15 28	March 1 15 31	April 1 15 30
Collect Materials on Earlier Initiatives (1/7)	C.Katz	----			
Determine Date of Announcement and Publicity Event (1/31)		----->			
Revisit Materials Collected by the Earlier Pluralism Committee (1/15)		----->			
Distill Materials from Scholars' Meetings (3/10)		----->			
Discuss Initiative with Policy Group, Agree on Concept, and Request Examples from Divisions (3/14)		----->			
Discuss Initiative with Reconvened Pluralism Committee (3/15-16)		----->			
Draft Statement (3/18)		----->			
Prepare Press Release and Publicity Materials; Begin Work on Glossy Flyer (3/20-23)		----->			
Announce Initiative (4/1)		----->			

----- Projected Completion Date

==== Actual Completion Date

**"NATIONAL CONVERSATION " SCHOLARS MEETING
MARCH 4-6, 1994, Chicago, Ill.**

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