

LETTERS *from Santa Fe*

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

APRIL 1991

John Agresto

DIVERSITY, MULTICULTURALISM, AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

Every now and then the academic community, as if in one spirit and one voice, turns to a new idea and, in virtually the twinkling of an eye, anoints that new notion with the oil of truth and the water of orthodoxy. In our day this new truth is diversity.

Diversity has a pleasing resonance to it. It sounds wholesome and right. It fits right into all the most contemporary trends in academic life: the proliferation of electives, the movement from colleges to universities to multiversities, the triumph of relativism, and the liberation of the dormitories. If one can still use it as a term of praise, diversity sounds so "American."

The opposite of diversity sounds so rigid, so nasty, so reactionary that it surely has few if any adherents—classics, core curricula, coherence, canons. . . . With pluralism and diversity all the rage, who today dares talk of required courses . . . except perhaps by some kind of odd paradox where the newly righteous might talk about *requiring* diversity everywhere. Indeed, it is amazing to behold how, in the name of diversity, all heterodox opinions are quickly being pushed out.

If I am critical of the academy's newfound infatuation with diversity, I am critical only in part, since I do believe that we, as Americans and as educators, have an interest in upholding the principle of diversity. Diversity is a key element of this civilization, and one deserving of serious respect. Indeed, liberal education was always thought to be grounded in a kind of diversity—the belief that, through the study of the various arts and sciences, small and closed minds could be enlarged and opened, that new ideas would replace old prejudices and that we might begin to rise from opinion to knowledge—that we might see the world as it is and see it whole.

Yet, today, diversity in academe hardly ever means the presentation of new perspectives, challenging ideas or divergent philosophies. It almost everywhere means dismantling the tradition of academic studies and erecting on its ruins courses that more neatly fit in with our contemporary ideas of class,

race, gender, and oppression. Almost everywhere "diversity" is code for the propagation of exactly its opposite—standardized exposure to contemporary ideology and to the politically correct.

The greatest stumbling block to the new orthodoxy of diversity is still the notion of a liberal education, still the remnant of the old idea of a coherent curriculum built around a core of courses in Western Civilization, classical humanities, mathematics, the sciences, and the great books. There once was a time when enlightened opinion wanted such courses to be offered to everyone—rich and poor, high and low. Now the academy fluctuates between thinking there really are no such things as "great books," to thinking that the tradition is surely pernicious, at least in so far as it undermines the demands of contemporary pluralism and sensitivity regarding diversity.

A Western Tradition of Diversity

But of all the things that could be said in favor of the bookish tradition of the West and the traditional curriculum of studies, let me mention just one—diversity. Unlike contemporary "diversity," liberal education always started with a respect for the diversity of outlook and ideas. For example, the past and its authors were studied not so much because they were like us as unlike us. Aristotle and Augustine defend social orders radically different from our own. Sophocles and Homer find praiseworthy or contemptible things quite at odds with current tastes. Dante and St. Paul are far more countercultural than Herbert Marcuse and Frantz Fanon any day. It was always understood that there was no learning the core of our own opinions without considering the divergent ideas of those radically different from ourselves. So, if it is diversity we are looking for—and we should be—the traditional curriculum is far livelier, far more radical, than today's academy is generally prepared to admit.

So, properly understood, true diversity lies at the heart of

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Dear Friends:

Within the last year, "diversity" and "multiculturalism" have become the most important words in all of contemporary higher education. A quick review of the literature might even lead a person to think that an education in "diversity" was the primary goal of all learning. Indeed, as one college president quoted in these pages asserts, "no college or university can any longer call itself great unless its administrators, faculty, program and students fully reflect the rich, multicultural diversity of contemporary America."

The error, the danger, the explicit misunderstanding of what liberal education is all about contained in that statement is what prompted the theme of this newsletter.

On a related topic, after the last newsletter appeared, higher education became embroiled in what the press always seems to refer to as a "flap" over the question of minority scholarships. Donald Stewart and Linda Chavez were kind enough to write articles for our newsletter taking opposing viewpoints on this subject. I am especially grateful for their agreeing to do so on very short notice. Our selection of reprinted articles also includes an address by Donald Kagan, Dean of Yale College and one of our new trustees at St. John's. Finally, this newsletter contains a short, original essay by one of our tutors, David Bolotin, on the radical nature and radical consequences of the new diversity.

Despite difficulties elsewhere, all seems well here in Santa Fe. The program continues to attract students in record numbers. One of our seniors is a new Rhodes Scholar—the first from our campus. And this June will mark the start of our first summer session for adults: a series of non-credit, week-long seminars on works from Plato to Heidegger. The summer will also find us hosting a free, six-week, public Shakespeare festival in the courtyard of our beautiful new library.

Meanwhile, I wish you well, and I look forward to hearing from you about this issue.

Diversity

Continued from page 1.

education. Education is meant to transform us, or at least give us the opportunity to be other than what we are, or what our society or class or parents or professors want us to be. The problem is that so much of what passes for liberation in education today is, instead, control, and control of the rankest sort. The dismantling of core courses has done less to liberate student minds than to ratify contemporary social beliefs and confirm contemporary prejudices. Without knowing the diversity of the full sweep of this civilization, our students will live only in the contemporary world, only in the present, only in the light of their own or their professors' opinions.

We will find few people more narrow than the contemporary advocates of diversity, few people more illiberal than those who would use the propagandistic potential of the classroom to possess their students' minds rather than let them possess their minds for themselves, few people more tendentious than those who claim that all education is political and then fulfill their own prophecies by propagandizing. Paradoxical as it may sound, every act by which traditional liberal education is today preserved and promoted is not simply a "conservative" act—for students it is a radical, liberating act at the same time.

Knowing Our Cultural Foundations

Of course, our cognition of true diversity is not the only reason for traditional liberal arts

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A quarterly newsletter on higher education

Published in January, April, July, and October at St. John's College, Santa Fe.

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“The traditional curriculum is far more radical than today’s academy is prepared to admit.”

education. Despite all its manifest divergencies, disagreements and distinctions, the tradition of the West still is that—a tradition: it formed us as a people, as a particular civilization, a culture. We were formed both by what we took from it and what we discarded. If knowing something other than what you are is a great desideratum of education, the first desideratum is to know yourself. A person who is ignorant of the Bible, of the ancient stories and fables and myths, of the history of Europe, of the reasons for the Reformation, of Homer or Shakespeare—that person is lost in this culture. It is, to be blunt, more important for an American to know the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address than to know the principles of Eastern mysticism. It is, conversely, more important for a student in China to know something about Marx and Mao than to be able to identify the dates of the Thirty Years’ War. It is also more important for recent Asian immigrants to know who Martin Luther King was than for American blacks to know the names of great figures in Cambodian politics. This is not arrogance on the part of Americans, nor on the part of other cultures when they do the same.

It seems, then, that what should be required are those books and studies that both teach students something about themselves and help liberate them from their contemporaries and from their professors and their prejudices. Our students need an education in both what has been handed down to them and in diversity of thought—always recognizing the unavoidable diversity within the tradition itself.

Finally, liberal education should make our students think about universals: What is beautiful? What is ugly? What should I love? What should I hate? What is justice? How should I behave? How can I live a satisfied life in the midst of unsatisfied desires? How can I be a friend? Why do all living things have to die? These are the kinds of questions our students ask before they are taught to become pedants and specialists. This is what they think philosophy and poetry might help them with, until they are taught that words have any meaning we wish, or all meanings, or no meaning. In fact, the real and perhaps only purpose for an education in diversity is to see

the truth about the greatest human things amid the cacaphony of discordant, diverse opinions. Diversity can be a catalyst for inquiry, and it properly ends in philosophy, not relativism. The greatest books and texts invite us to think about these universal issues—issues that go far beyond race, class, and sex. Contemporary diversity, on the other hand, abandons the study of real differences, abandons the quest for the discovery of universals and is tyrannized by the power of the particular and the merely accidental. ■

Author’s note: This article was originally an address delivered and, as you might well understand, contemptuously treated at a meeting of the Modern Language Association in December 1989.

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"Multi-culturalism" turns out to be neither multi nor cultural.

THE DERISORY TOWER

What follows is an editorial that appeared in the New Republic on February 18, 1991. It introduced a series of essays on the worst of contemporary abuses in higher education, primarily on the topic of race. Although any number of those essays could have been worth repeating, the overview of the editorial may be the most incisive of them all.

—J.A.

Scarcely a generation goes by without a "crisis" in the universities. From Gibbon to Bloom the lamentation has become almost a literary genre. It is tempting to believe that if these crises did not exist, it would be necessary for social critics to invent them. Still, they have been real often enough. In our century they have ranged from the malignity of totalitarianism in the 1930s to the insipid demand for skills—of law, business, medicine, even politics—in the 1970s and 80s. Each has warped the integrity of university life, distracted the university from its central task of open-ended, disinterested inquiry. More recently, higher learning has been burdened by the weight of its own growth, by the preference for publishing over teaching, by the logic of bureaucracy.

The most common cause of these recurrent crises has been the demand that the university conform to one orthodoxy or another. Among the roster of opponents of free, subversive thought have been the usual suspects: religion, patriotism, Marxism, materialism, bourgeois propriety. These critiques of the old ideal of free academic inquiry have usually succeeded in making people forget that such freedom is one of the higher and most powerful forms of subversion. And (happily) they have tended to elicit a spirited response in defense of heterodoxy at the heart of university life.

Prisoners of Race

The newest attack on the idea of a heterodox university is based on a familiar rejection of genuinely pluralist thought, and wishes to replace that thought with one of the most destructive and demeaning orthodoxies of our time. This orthodoxy, to summarize the core of the "multiculturalists'" argument, is that race is the determinant of a human being's mind, that the mind cannot, and should not, try to wrest itself from its biological or sociological origins. There are accounts both of the curriculum's transformation to conform to the dogma of race and of a revolution in admissions, faculty hiring, lecturing, writing, speaking, and thinking to reflect this assumption. This is not merely a philosophical quarrel. On America's campuses

today the issue of race is unavoidable. The impact of affirmative action upon the tenor of even the simplest class discussion is profound. Resentful whites jostle uncomfortably with suspicious minority students, struggling with situations they find personally overwhelming. Well-qualified blacks and Hispanics feel the need to prove their worth, or are wracked with the suspicion that they may not owe their place to merit. Hour upon hour of precious faculty time is spent soothing racial sensitivities or deconstructing the canon on ethnic lines. Deep-rooted racism—which still undoubtedly and regrettably exists on campus—blurs with legitimate reactions to the imposition of "political correctness." Our universities, which should strive for an identity in contradistinction to the world at large, have become distillations of our bitterest social divisions.

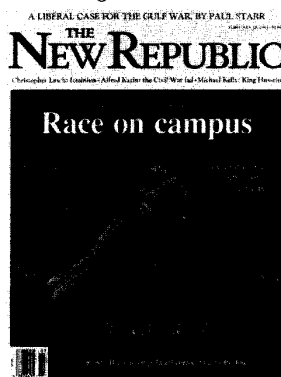
At the bottom of this dispute is an idea that is worth tackling at its roots. In its most popular form, "multiculturalism" holds that the traditional idea of free thought is an illusion propagated by the spoilers of freedom by the relations of power that obtain in any given society. It holds, more specifically, that the old liberal notion of freedom is only a sentimental mask of a power structure that is definitionally oppressive of those who are not white Western males. And this ideological and methodological principle is not merely a cautionary note to be taken into account when studying the established texts of Western civilization; it is, in the hands of the "multiculturalists," the very meaning of—the deepest truth about—those texts. (Sometimes their argument is further complicated by the notion that no stable meaning at all can be attributed to texts, but we leave that issue to the junior faculty.) The university should therefore be devoted to blowing the whistle on those texts, to replacing them with those that identify and transcend this white male oppression, and indeed go beyond mere study to the actual defeat of the racial and sexual structure of society at large.

An End to Open Exchange

"Multiculturalism" turns out, then, to be neither multi nor cultural. In practice, its objective is a unanimity of thought on campus that, if successful, would effectively end open exchange—exchange that would have to include the alleged representatives of patriarchy—and reduce the nuances of culture to the determinants of race. True multiculturalism, which we applaud and hope to see flourish, would, in contrast, set no

borders to texts and ideas, histories and cultures, lives and images, from worlds alien to our own. It would attempt to account for the social and political context in all texts, as rigorous criticism must do. (Which texts, in what language, from which society, do not come to us from the midst of terrible relations of power? Certainly not the texts of the East). It would assume, as a matter of philosophical principle, that at least inner independence, freedom of thought and imagination, may be attributed to great writers and artists in all societies, however repressive.

We are opposed to the current "multiculturalist" trend, then, not because we believe that accounting for sexual, racial, and political bias in text is not a worthwhile (though limited) intellectual exercise, but because we believe that it is not the only worthwhile intellectual exercise. What the "multiculturalist" criticism of the canon fails to grasp is that the canon is itself a cacophony, that it teaches not certainty but doubt, that it presents not a single Western doctrine about



the true or the good or the beautiful, but an internecine Western war between different accounts of those values, which will rattle the student more than it will ever reassure her. The idea that Plato and Heidegger, Proust and Thucydides, Hegel and Freud are somehow intellectual equivalents because of their sex, race and class is absurd, and evaporates upon inspection. Indeed, many of the fathers of the "multiculturalist" church—Derrida, Foucault, Nietzsche, Gramsci—are themselves white males. How did they get away unscathed? Or does their work, too, express, however unwittingly, nothing but the social and sexual biases of their time and place?

The university that we defend is a truly subversive institution. It is devoted to the pursuit of inquiry, with no end in sight, and with no justification except its own curiosity. It is dedicated to the life of the mind as a radically undetermined adventure, a ship on an endless and bottomless sea, open to all breezes (even multiculturalist breezes), deft in all currents, with no particular destination, and no harbor in sight. Soon, we hope, those

who share this vision—the real subversives in our universities—will emerge to defend it against the racial dogmatists. We have confidence that they will prevail, not least because students get impatient with the platitudes of political orthodoxy, but also because they will provide the proper context for the genuine insights of multiculturalism to be appreciated. We have no doubt that Foucault, Derrida, et al are worthy of study. Their ideas are not contemptible, and they have the old virtue of being dangerous.

Tackling Race Relations in America

Our quarrel with today's "multiculturalism," however, is based not only on a concern for thinking and teaching in the university, but also on a concern for tackling the real issue of race relations in our country. To be blunt, we do not believe that racism will ever finally be defeated by a sophisticated version of its own logic. An orthodoxy that prefers those texts that are racially pure, and advances those students whose race—and race alone—entitles them to study them, is one that will never free people from the iniquities of racial prejudice. It may even serve to entrench these habits of thought (or non-thought), as angry whites and angry blacks battle each other over the remnants of each other's pride.

The furor over affirmative action in admissions and hiring in our universities and over a "multicultural" curriculum is, in fact, a bitterly ironic distraction from the battle against racial injustice in our society at large. While students and academics squabble over whether to include Alice Walker in a freshman reading list, a whole generation of black and Hispanic children is mired in a culture of poverty, dependency, and crime, which our government has neither the honesty nor the will to address appropriately. High school education for many inner-city blacks and Hispanics is affected by this culture as well. Without confronting this issue baldly, and taking the uncomfortable measures to tackle it, the "multicultural" posturings in our colleges are at best the indulgence of an elite, at worst cynically destructive.

The real danger is that the "multicultural" orthodoxy is itself a disguise for an indifference, or a particular political attitude, to this greater issue. It whispers in our ears that the barriers of race are unbridgeable; that thought cannot undo them; that education cannot mitigate them; that a liberal government in a liberal society cannot do anything to achieve a more colorblind society; that racism is, indeed, ineradicable. It is the inheritance of liberals to resist this seduction, not only because it is a temptation to intellectual orthodoxy, but also because it is a temptation to political despair. ■

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Like most others in the education community, I was shocked by the U.S. Department of Education's announcement on December 11 that postsecondary institutions receiving federal aid could no longer offer scholarships solely on the basis of race. The Department's six-point "clarification" of its policy—released on December 18—raised more questions than it answered, and subsequent commentary offered little clarification.

As an educator, and an African American, I take pride in the progress that has been made since I was a college student in the number of minorities going to college. It should be noted for the record that the number of African American men and women attending college has increased markedly over the past decade, as has the number of Hispanic men and women. The scores of African American students on our SAT exams have increased significantly over the past ten years, even as those of white students have remained the same. And the number of minority students taking and doing well in our Advanced Placement courses has skyrocketed. Over the past decade the number of African American and Hispanic men and women graduating from high school has grown even more swiftly than the number going on to college.

Unquestionably, one of the reasons for the success achieved with regard to minorities in higher education has been the growing availability of minority scholarships at institutions that are predominantly white. We have found that nearly 700 colleges and universities nationwide have scholarships designated for minorities, and we are currently in the process of gathering even more data on this subject. They have them for good, selfinterested reasons as well as for democratic and civic-minded ones. As Donna Shalala, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Madison has noted, no college or university can any longer call itself great unless its administrators, faculty, programs and students fully reflect the rich, multicultural diversity of contemporary America.

The sad news is that the proportion of African American high school graduates aged 18 to 24 going to college has leveled off. On a percentage basis, it has remained at 28 percent in the decade of the 1980s. More ominously, the American Council on Education reports that degree attainment for these groups has declined in recent years, and that the percentage of students attending college from low-income families has also remained unchanged.

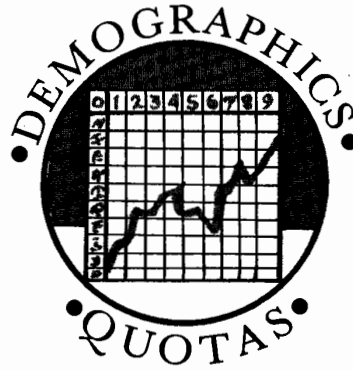
Donald Stewart is president of the College Board.

It is my view that, in fact, a ruling of this sort can seriously put in jeopardy the future of our great nation. As my good friend, Lou Harris, told the College Board's national forum two years ago, "by the end of the next decade, our country will have either succeeded or failed on the pivotal issue of how to open the doors of opportunity to minority young people. If we succeed in [making] them creative, thinking workers, as must happen with young whites, then surely we will have created a strongly competitive America that will be the envy of the world. But if we fail that will condemn us to second tier economic status as a nation. Mark it well."

Recent comments and proposed legislation have made clear, moreover, it was not the intent of Congress, when it enacted Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to outlaw efforts to increase the distressingly low numbers of minority students in predominantly white colleges and universities nationwide.

On a more philosophical note, as the great observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted, the impulse to address problems through voluntary, private acts is what has set America apart from other nations and allowed so much private energy to flow to the public good. We heard this theme sounded during the last presidential campaign in President Bush's 1000 points of light, representing the great American way for meeting social needs. Therefore, the announcements of the Office of Civil Rights are nothing if not paradoxical. For any policy or action by OCR that would end these programs of minority scholarships would directly contradict both the spirit of de Tocqueville and President Bush, and tie one of America's arms behind its back. Targeted funds, voluntarily given, is how we get things done, whether for the homeless, for AIDS victims, for the environment or for education. More specifically, it would not only undo the great progress we have made in increasing the diversity of students on formerly white campuses, but it would also have a secondary consequence of discouraging potential donors from giving to higher education in general.

In closing let me say that if this policy is allowed to stand, the clear message it will send to young minority men and women is that their higher education in predominantly white institutions is a matter of indifference to this nation. Coming after so many years of trying to persuade them that, in fact, the way is open, and that their presence is desirable and desired in the educational community, and necessary for our national social and economic well being, that would be a tragic outcome indeed. ■



When Assistant Secretary of Education Michael Williams announced in December that awarding scholarships on the basis of race or ethnicity violates civil rights laws, even President Bush treated him like the grinch who stole Christmas. The education establishment was quick to attack Mr. Williams' temerity; one University of Pennsylvania law professor said, "it's obscene to use civil rights laws to support the exclusion of minority students from higher education." The fact that Mr. Williams is black made him an apostate in his critics' eyes.

The reaction to Williams' announcement is a measure of how topsy-turvy the civil rights world has become in the last twenty-five years. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 promised to banish invidious distinctions between individuals based on race, national origin, gender or religion; now people who call themselves proponents of civil rights want preferences handed out according to such characteristics. One school of education gives black students a .5 grade point advantage over other students; another university pays black students \$550 for maintaining a C average, \$1,100 for anything above a C + average; a university graduate school guarantees full financial support, regardless of need, for any minority student admitted. Students who attend these schools are treated to different standards depending on their race. We used to call that discrimination. There is something inherently patronizing in such attempts at race-based preference, no matter how good the intentions. Why should a black student be rewarded for mediocre academic performance, and what possible incentive does he have to excel if his grades will be artificially inflated simply because of his skin color? Assigning benefits because of race—whether those benefits consist of college admission, financial aid, or better grades—is unfair both to those who are denied such benefits and those who are the intended beneficiaries.

Five years ago when my oldest son was a senior in high school he received several unsolicited offers of scholarship aid from colleges to which he had not applied. One private college in Pennsylvania promised him a four-year scholarship for \$22,000, without even seeing a copy of his high school

transcript. These schools were interested only in his status as a "minority" student. I couldn't help but wonder whether there wasn't some promising non-minority student somewhere in Pennsylvania—perhaps the son or daughter of an out-of-work coal miner—who wouldn't benefit more from such scholarship aid than my son. In the end, my son turned down all the scholarships he was offered; he knew his high school grades didn't merit them and our family's financial status certainly didn't justify his receiving such largesse. Instead, he decided to attend our state university, whose regular admission standards he could meet and whose tuition he could afford. But he was left feeling uncomfortable nonetheless. He never thought of himself as disadvantaged or as a victim, but these schools assumed that he was both simply because of his ethnicity.

Historically, colleges have dispensed scholarships to students who possessed some special talent, usually academic or athletic, or who showed promise but could not afford to pay for college. These criteria still offer the most equitable way to distribute financial assistance. ■

For the Record:

Knowing they would have different views of the matter, I asked both Donald Stewart and Linda Chavez to respond to the issue of race-based scholarships raised recently by the Department of Education. I asked them both to address, in particular, the more philosophical question of the correctness of such scholarships. It is probably right to note here that although nearly 60 percent of St. John's students receive some form of financial aid, the college has no scholarships for which race or minority status is a criterion. Our college catalogue states that all benefits are given "without regard to race, color, creed, sex, or national origin," and we intend to abide by that principle.

—J.A.

Linda Chavez is former executive director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. She is presently an author and syndicated columnist.

In Defense of the Great Books

We are living in a time when many of the academic heirs of the Western tradition are turning against that tradition. It is not merely that an old philosophy is being challenged by a new philosophy, or an old claim to revelation by a new one. Rather, the very presuppositions of all philosophy and of all Biblical religion are being denied. And they are being denied not in the name of Eastern wisdom, but in the name of history and of cultural diversity. The fundamental presupposition of all philosophy and theology, namely that there is a lasting and comprehensive truth, which the thinking individual is capable of attaining, or at least approaching, is being denied in the name of the view that all "truth" is merely relative to the historical context of the thinker, and that all historical or cultural or even group perspectives are equally true or valid. Even the Western science of nature is coming to be seen as a cultural myth, and a myth of no greater truth and dignity than many others we might choose to fabricate.

Now this prejudice, as we know, has been around for a long time. But recently, within the American academic establishment, it has taken on a new and particularly threatening form. It is now no longer just a theoretical claim, but it has taken on an explicitly political cast. Those, like ourselves, who try to keep alive the possibility that there is a non-historical truth, and hence that some perspectives might be closer to the truth, and hence better, than others, no longer hear merely that our views are true only for us, or only in a relative sense. We, or at least the principles of our Program, are now also being attacked by many in the academic establishment as elitist, ethnocentric, logocentric, racist, sexist, religionist, and so forth. Book lists such as ours are now being criticized as a kind of canon, and our attachment to the great books is said to stem from political motives, namely in order to exclude outsiders and to maintain our own priestly power within a larger system of oppression. Finally, more and more of our critics are coming to see the chief, or at least most urgent, task of contemporary education as the political one of eradicating all traces of what they regard as elitist or exclusionist ways of thinking (cf. John Searle, "The Storm over the University," *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 1990, p. 34 ff.).

Widespread Lowering of Standards

Now if this attack should come to prevail among us, our reading list would of course be significantly transformed. But the mere addition of some mediocre or merely good books is not the greatest evil that would ensue. (Indeed,

a few of the changes might even be for the better.) Rather, the chief evil is the way that all books would come to be read. The old books would come to be seen chiefly, if not entirely, as steppingstones that have prepared the way for the ideas of the present, which in turn are preparing the way for the ideas of the future, ideas whose merit consists solely in their alleged openness to diversity and their alleged freedom from the sin of being judgmental. The old books would no longer have the power to challenge our students' uncritical acceptance of the contemporary views that inundate their ears day after day. When Plato or Hegel, for instance, argue that the life of the mind is the highest life, we would no longer even consider these arguments as they present themselves, since we would "know" in advance that they could not possibly be true. We would "know" that the authors are merely expressing a Eurocentric perspective that fails to respect the equal dignity and validity of all lifestyles. The very claim that there are any permanent standards by which individuals, groups, and cultures have to be measured would be met with selfrighteous indignation or passed over with an embarrassed or uncomprehending silence. The lowering of standards that so permeates the contemporary world would be fixed in place by the denial in principle that there are any true standards, except perhaps for standards so empty that no one could conceivably take offense at them.

Upholding a Higher Truth

It is often said by critics of the traditional curriculum that we need a new kind of education in order to prepare our students for a future in which diverse cultures will become increasingly interdependent. Now if this claim were advanced merely in order to recommend serious study of great books from non-Western cultures, it would deserve serious consideration. But what is more commonly said, even by the less radical among our critics, is that we need an essentially new curriculum, one that will introduce our students to the new ideas that will dominate the new kind of future. And this argument is deeply mistaken. For even apart from its exaggerated claim to be able to predict the dominant ideas of the future, it forgets that the primary question, for us and for all thinking individuals, is whether those future ideas will be true or truer than those of the past. Not because we stand for the past, but because we stand for the possibility of a higher truth than the so-called truths of culture and history, we need to resist the tide that would take us nowhere but to shallow relativism or to shallow conformity with ideas that present themselves as those of the future. ■

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David Bolotin is a tutor at St. John's College.

Donald Kagan

An Address to the Class of 1994

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 1994, parents, and friends, greetings and welcome to Yale. To a greater degree than ever before this class is made up of a sampling, not of Connecticut, not of New England, not even of North America, but of all the continents of the world. As I stood a year ago greeting the Class of 1993, I was thrilled by how much Yale (and America) has been enriched in the three centuries since its foundation by the presence and the contribution of the many racial and ethnic groups rarely if ever represented in its early years. The greater diversity among our faculty and student body, as in the American people at large, is a source of strength and it should be a source of pride, as well.

But ethnic and racial diversity is not without its problems. Few governments and societies have been able to combine diversity with internal peace, harmony, freedom, and the unity required to achieve these goals. Perhaps the greatest success in ancient times was achieved by the Roman empire, which absorbed a wide variety of peoples under a single government, generally tolerated cultural diversity, and gradually granted to all Roman citizenship, the rule of law, and equality before the law. But the Romans imposed their rule over independent nations by force and maintained peace and order by its threat. From the nations whose cultures they tolerated they did not create a single people; they did not and could not rely on the voluntary and enthusiastic participation in government and society of a unified population, as a modern democratic republic must.

From the Middle Ages until its collapse in 1918, the Hapsburg empire did a remarkable job of bringing a great variety of different ethnic groups into the mainstream of government and society, but it never succeeded in dissolving the distinct identities of the different groups, living together in separate communities, speaking their native languages, competing and quarreling with one another, and finally hostile to the dominant ethnic groups. The destruction of the Hapsburg empire and

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E PLURIBUS UNUM

its dissolution into smaller units did not end ethnic dissension, which today threatens the survival of such successor states as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

Diversity's Powerful Forces

In our time, nationalism and ethnicity have emerged as immensely powerful forces, for good but also for evil. Optimistic hopes for a diminution of differences among peoples and for a movement toward the unity of all mankind have been dashed as national and ethnic hostilities have played a major part in bringing on two terrible world wars. Even today they threaten to tear the Soviet Union apart and represent a menace to peace both in Europe and Africa. They have brought inter-ethnic slaughter to Nigeria and all but destroyed the beautiful land of Lebanon.

From its origins the United States of America has faced a new challenge and opportunity. Its early settlers from the old world were somewhat diverse but had much in common. Most were British, spoke English, and practiced some form of Protestant Christianity. Before long, however, people of many different ethnic, religious, and national origins arrived with different cultural traditions, speaking various languages. Except for the slaves brought from Africa, most came voluntarily, in families and as individuals, usually eager to satisfy desires that could not be met in their former homelands. They swiftly became citizens and, within a generation or so, Americans. In our own time, finally, after too long a delay, African Americans also have achieved freedom, equality before the law, and full citizenship. People of different origins live side by side, often in ethnic communities, but never in enclaves separated from other enclaves. Although some inherit greater advantages than others, all are equal before the law, which does not recognize ethnic or other groups but only

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individuals. Each person is free to maintain old cultural practices, to abandon them for ones found outside his ethnic group, or to create some mixture or combination of both of them.

Our country is not a nation like most others. "Nation" comes from the Latin word for birth: a nation is a group of people of common ancestry, a breed. Chinese, Frenchmen, and Swedes feel a bond that ties them to their compatriots as to a greatly extended family and provides the unity and commitment they need. But Americans do not share a common ancestry and a common blood. They and their forebears come from every corner of the earth. What they have in common and what brings them together is a system of laws and beliefs that shaped the establishment of the country, a system developed within the context of Western civilization. It should be obvious, then, that all Americans need to learn about that civilization if we are to understand our country's origins, and share in its heritage, purposes, and character.

At present, however, the study of Western civilization in our schools and colleges is under heavy attack. We are told that we should not give a privileged place in the curriculum to the great works of its history and literature. At the extremes of this onslaught the civilization itself, and therefore its study, is attacked for its history of slavery, imperialism, racial prejudice, addiction to war, its exclusion of women and people not of the white race from its rights and privilege. Some criticize the study of Western civilization as narrow, limiting, arrogant, and discriminatory, asserting that it has little or no value for those of different cultural origins. Others concede the value of the Western heritage but regard it as only one among many, all of which have equal claim to our attention. These attacks are unsound. It is both right and necessary to place Western civilization and the culture to which it has given rise at the center of our studies, and we fail to do so at the peril of our students, our country, and of the hopes for a democratic, liberal society emerging throughout the world today.

Universal Wisdom of the West

In response to those who claim that Western culture is relevant only to a limited group it is enough to quote W.E.B. Du Bois, the African-American intellectual and political leader, writing at the turn of the century in a *Jim Crow America*:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I walk arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing

between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil.

For Du Bois the wisdom of the West's great writers was valuable for all, and he would not allow himself or others to be deprived of it because of the accident of race. Such was and is the view of the millions of people of both genders and every ethnic group who have personally experienced the value and significance of the Western heritage.

The assault on the character of Western civilization badly distorts history. The West's flaws are real enough, but they are common to almost all the civilizations known on any continent at any time in human history. What is remarkable about the Western heritage and what makes it essential are the important ways in which it has departed from the common experience. More than any other it has asserted the claims of the individual against those of the state, limiting the state's power and creating a realm of privacy into which it cannot penetrate. By means of the philosophical, scientific, agricultural, and industrial revolutions that have taken place in the West, human beings have been able to produce and multiply the things needed for life so as to make survival and prosperity possible for ever-increasing numbers, without rapacious wars and at a level that permits dignity and independence.

Champion of Democratic Government

Western civilization is the champion of representative democracy as the normal way for human beings to govern themselves, in place of the different varieties of monarchy, oligarchy, and tyranny that have ruled most of the human race throughout history and rule most of the world today. It has produced the theory and practice of the separation of church and state, thereby protecting each from the other and creating a free and safe place for individual conscience. At its core is a tolerance and respect for diversity unknown in most cultures. One of its most telling characteristics is its encouragement of criticism of itself and its ways. Only in the West can one imagine a movement to neglect the culture's own heritage in favor of some other. The university itself, a specially sheltered place for such self-examination, is a Western phenomenon, only partially assimilated by other cultures.

My claim is that most of the sins and errors of Western civilization are those of the human race. Its special achievements and values, however, are gifts to all humanity and are widely seen as such around the world today, although their authorship is rarely acknowl-

edged. People everywhere envy not only its science and technology but also its freedom and popular government and the institutions that make them possible. The roots of these things are to be found uniquely in the experience and ideas of the West.

In short, Western culture and institutions are the most powerful paradigm in the world today. As they increasingly become the objects of emulation by peoples everywhere, their study becomes essential for those of all nations. How odd that Americans should choose this moment to declare Western civilization irrelevant, unnecessary, and even vicious.

There is, in fact, great need to make the Western heritage the central and common study in American schools, colleges, and universities today. Happily, student bodies have grown vastly more diverse. Less happily, students are seeing themselves increasingly as parts of groups, distinct from other groups. They often feel pressure to communicate mainly with others like themselves within the group and to pursue intellectual interests that are of no particular importance to it. The result that threatens is a series of discrete experiences in college, isolated from one another, segregated and partial. But a liberal education needs to create a challenge to the ideas, habits, and attitudes that students bring with them, so that their vision may be broadened, their knowledge expanded, their understanding deepened. That challenge must come from studies that are unfamiliar, sometimes uncomfortably so, and from a wide variety of fellow students from many different backgrounds, holding different opinions, expressing them freely to one another, and exploring them together.

The Common Culture of Change

If the students are to educate one another in this way, some part of their studies must be common, and their natural subject is the experience of which our country is the heir and of which it remains an important part. There is, after all, a common culture in our society, itself various, changing, rich with the contributions of Americans who come or whose ancestors came from every continent in the world, yet recognizably and unmistakably American. At this moment in history an objective observer would have to say that American culture derives chiefly from the experience of Western civilization, and especially from England, whose language and institutions are the most copious springs from which it draws its life. I say this without embarrassment, as an immigrant who arrived here as an infant from Lithuania, a tiny country on the fringe of the West, without any connection with the Anglo-Saxon founders of the United States. Our students will be handicapped in their lives after college if they do not have a broad and deep knowledge of the

culture in which they live and the roots from which it comes.

There are implications, too, for our public life. Constitutional government and democracy are not natural blessings; they are far from common in the world today, and they have been terribly rare in the history of the human race. They are the product of some peculiar developments in the history of Western civilization, and they, too, need to be thoroughly understood by all our citizens if our ways of governing ourselves is to continue and flourish. We must all understand how it works, how it came to be, and how hard it is to sustain.

“Hang Together or Hang Separately”

Our country was invented and has grown strong by achieving unity out of diversity while respecting the importance and integrity of the many elements that make it up. The founders chose as a slogan *e pluribus unum*, which provided a continuing and respected place for the plurality of the various groups that made up the country, but which also emphasized the unity that was essential for the nation's well-being. During the revolution that brought us to independence, Benjamin Franklin addressed his colleagues, different from one another in so many ways, yet dependent on one another for survival and success, using a serious pun to make his point. He told them that they must all hang together or assuredly they would all hang separately. That warning still has meaning for Americans today. As our land becomes ever more diverse, the danger of separation, segregation by ethnic group, mutual suspicion, and hostility increases and with it the danger to the national unity which, ironically, is essential to the qualities that attracted its many peoples to this country. Our colleges and universities have a great responsibility to communicate and affirm the value of our common heritage, even as they question it and continue to broaden it with rich new elements.

Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 1994, you, too, have important responsibilities. Take pride in your families and in the culture they and your forebears have brought to our shores. Learn as much as you can about that culture and share it with all of us. Learn as much as you can of what the particular cultures of others have to offer. But most important, do not fail to learn the great traditions that are the special gifts of that Western civilization which is the main foundation of our university and our country. Do not let our separate heritages draw us apart and build walls between us, but use them to enrich the whole. In that way they may join with our common heritage to teach us, to bring us together as friends, to unite us into a single people seeking common goals, to make a reality of the ideal inherent in the motto *e pluribus unum*. ■

Profile Profile Profile Profile Profile Profile Profile

■ Founded:

Established in 1696 in Annapolis, Maryland, as King William's School and chartered in 1784 as St. John's College. Great Books Program adopted 1937. Second campus in Santa Fe opened in 1964.

■ Curriculum:

An integrated, four-year, non-elective arts and science program based on reading and discussing, in loosely chronological order, the Great Books of Western Civilization.

■ Approach:

Tutorials, laboratories, and seminars requiring intense participation replace more traditional lectures. Classes are very small. Student/faculty ratio is 8:1. St. John's is independent and non-sectarian.

■ Degree Granted:

Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts.

■ Student Body:

Enrollment is limited to about 400 students on each campus. Current freshman class made up of 55% men and 45% women, from 30 states and several foreign countries. Fifty-seven percent receive financial aid. Students may transfer between the Santa Fe and Annapolis campuses.

■ Alumni Careers:

Education—21%, business—20%, law—10%, visual and performing arts—9%, medicine—7%, science and engineering—7%, computer science—6%, writing and publishing—5%.

■ Graduate Institute:

The Graduate Institute in Liberal Education is an interdisciplinary Master's degree program based on the same principles as the undergraduate program. Offered on both campuses year-round.

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