

KEYNOTE

What follows is the keynote address that Bruce Cole, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, delivered on 31 May 2002 to the tenth general conference of the National Association of Scholars.

Shoring Up the Humanities

Bruce Cole

Good afternoon. It's a real pleasure to be here—especially since I see so many old friends in the audience and, I hope, new ones. Thank you for honoring me with the invitation to speak to you.

I first learned of the good work of the NAS over breakfast. Between sips of coffee my eye caught a newspaper article about a group of professors who had formed a new scholarly organization. Their mission statement spoke of “rational discourse as the foundation of academic life in a free and democratic society,” and promoted an “informed understanding of the Western intellectual heritage.”

Wow, I thought, who are these revolutionaries and how can I find them?

What impressed me most about NAS members was not their scholarly distinction, which was considerable, nor their courage to challenge the status quo, but their call for true diversity: for many voices all engaged in free and rational discussion, for an open marketplace of ideas, some new and promising, some old and proven.

At the center of this enterprise was Steve Balch, a scholar who has devoted much of his life to the NAS and labored tirelessly toward its success. Many of you here today worked alongside him; to you I offer congratulations and sincere thanks. You have made an enormous and courageous contribution to higher education in our country.

From what I read, the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* often call Steve and NAS executive director Brad Wilson to ask them to weigh in on this scholarly event or that academic controversy. I've jokingly told Steve that he and the NAS have become part of The Establishment.

He never laughs.

This afternoon I would like to share some of my thoughts on the importance of the humanities, some challenges we face, and my hopes for the future of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I offer these as starting

Bruce Cole is chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and was Distinguished Professor of Fine Arts at Indiana University, Bloomington. His most recent book is *The Informed Eye: Understanding Masterpieces of Western Art* (Ivan R. Dee, 2000). Please address correspondence to *Academic Questions* / NAS, 221 Witherspoon Street, Second Floor, Princeton, NJ 08542–3215; editor@nas.org.

points for discussion amongst this community of scholars. As one who has been on the job less than six months, I not only welcome, but request, your thoughts, input, and counsel. And, I will try to be brief because even as a fledgling Washingtonian I have learned that pithiness is next to godliness, but even rarer.

The Importance of the Humanities

The NEH's founding legislation declares that "democracy demands wisdom." To exist, our country needs educated and thoughtful citizens who can fully and intelligently participate in our government of, by, and for the people. As James Madison famously wrote, "the diffusion of knowledge is the only true guardian of liberty." Like the National Association of Scholars, the NEH exists to foster the wisdom and knowledge essential to our national identity and survival.

The range of the humanities disciplines is wide; their impact deep. The classics and archeology show us from whence our civilization came. The study of literature and art shape our sense of beauty. And the knowledge of philosophy and religion give meaning to our concepts of justice and goodness. The broader importance of our work must always be present in our minds. The humanities show us where we've been, where we are, and provide a compass for the future.

Indeed, the state of the humanities has real implications for the state of our union. Our nation is in a conflict driven by religion, philosophy, political ideology, and views of history—all humanities subjects. Our tolerance, our principles, our wealth, and our liberties have made us targets. Defending our democracy demands more than successful military campaigns. It also requires an understanding of the ideals, ideas, and institutions that have shaped our country.

Unfortunately, Americans' knowledge of their history is sketchy to the point of scandal. Every new poll and study serves further to confirm the breadth of ignorance surrounding our nation's history, government, and principles. The recent study conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that students at elite universities were largely ignorant of civics and history. More recently, the NAEP test showed that the longer students stay in school, the more likely they are to lack even a basic understanding of American history.

Such collective amnesia is dangerous.

We cannot effectively defend our system of government if we don't know what it is. The humanities tell us who we are as a people and why our country is worth fighting for. Our democracy was not predestined nor its survival guaranteed.

By its nature, democracy is fragile and continually in need of defense. Franklin expressed this well. After signing the Constitution, he was stopped by a young woman who asked: "Dr. Franklin, what kind of government did you give us? A monarchy or a republic?" To which Franklin replied: "A republic—if you can keep it."

We cannot let down our guard.

The humanities are essential not only to protecting civic life, but also to enriching individual lives. It has been said that a good education is a travel

guide to life, infusing all one sees, hears, and experiences with increased meaning. The humanities reward study with an enlarged imagination, a broadened perspective, and a critical intelligence. These qualities may appear ethereal, but they have profound practical implications. Like a good map, they help direct our journey, explain the signposts, distinguish between destinations, and teach us along the way.

Challenges to the Humanities

Virtually all important ideas and institutions face challenges, and humanities teaching and scholarship are not immune. I'd like to share with you three significant tests facing the humanities.

First and foremost, the academy is confronting serious and embarrassing ethical challenges. As we all know, the last few years have brought numerous examples of well-documented plagiarism against some of the best-known scholars and public intellectuals. Even as we speak, one scholar is accused of academic fraud. In many universities, students are expelled for mere sloppiness in attribution. In such cases, professors, administrators, and other university officials have no problem judging the student's action, and enforcing discipline.

Those who teach and publish should be held to a higher, not a lower, standard. Universities, scholarly societies, independent research institutions, and indeed the NEH must vigorously, fairly, and scrupulously investigate and adjudicate scholarly misconduct wherever it occurs. To fail to do so is a mistake, and a disaster.

Yet it is not enough merely to identify misconduct; it must be punished. There need to be consequences to ethical violations. If the academic community is unwilling to adjudicate cases of scholarly dishonesty, it divests itself of the authority and moral credibility to pass judgment on broader social issues.

The work of every scholar stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and steadily builds our knowledge and broadens our understanding.

I want to applaud the Organization of American Historians' recent statement on Honesty and Integrity. To quote:

Honesty and integrity should undergird the work of all historians The OAH categorically condemns lying as well as falsification and deliberate distortion of the teaching of history. Such mendacity is an ethical violation of the principle of truth on which the historical profession is based.

When a link in the chain of scholarship is broken by deceit or fraud, more is lost than the deceiver's reputation. The academic community cannot tolerate plagiarism, fraud, or other forms of misconduct without destroying the trust on which it relies. The academy must be a place of open discourse, a haven where divergent and even disagreeable positions are freely spoken, and where debate should be free of intolerance and dogmatism. But in our aversion to rigid judgmentalism, we cannot abandon making judgments.

The NEH recently made such a judgment by stripping the NEH name from a fellowship supported via a re-grant. The controversy surrounding Michael Bellesiles' scholarship in the book *Arming America* may be well known to you. The library that awarded him an "NEH Fellowship" was derelict in not considering the serious and scholarly objections that had been raised already about the validity and veracity of his work, and therefore, his application.

We accept that, as a federal agency invested with the public trust and the public's resources, it is incumbent upon us to hold our grantees—in this case, the Newberry Library—to the highest ethical standards. We owe it to the citizens whose tax dollars support us.

A second challenge to the humanities comes from market and professional pressures.

Too many colleges and universities are turning their focus away from liberal education to professional training. In a tight job market, students tend to concentrate on their employment prospects, and not even the academy is exempt from the laws of supply and demand. As a result, humanities scholars have been called upon to justify their existence and measure their success against inappropriate standards. When a university begins to set its priorities and determine its class offerings according to return on the dollar, it is not long before accounting will force out philosophy.

This challenge must be met, and bested. An education that provides little more than job training impoverishes a student's intellect and imagination and shortchanges both the student and the student's future employers. A true liberal education prepares one for life—civic, private, and personal, as well as professional.

The humanities are so named because they teach us about being human—the best and worst of human experience, the highest and greatest of human thought, the *sturm und drang* of human experience. Colleges and universities need to be the foremost advocates for liberal education, not timid apologists. The humanities, and the liberal arts in general, are not the luxuries of an indolent aristocratic class, they are the democratic catalysts of the good and examined life. We cannot abandon them to market whims.

The third challenge is one of self-marginalization. I know that many of my colleagues have found their work channeled into narrow specialties defined by technical, jargon-filled writing.

The pressure for scholars to develop their own highly specialized research niches can yield exciting new work, but taken to an extreme, denies public access to scholarly discourse.

Let me give you just one example. I received an email a couple of months ago, inviting me to a forum on Neo-Nationalism.

The invitation beckoned me with the following description—and I quote: "This panel will address this hyphenated formation with attention to the present and historical (dis)articulations of the nation (as imagined community) and

the state (as administrative apparatus). What are the conjugations of nation and state in our own historical moment? . . .” And so it goes.

As intriguing as this invitation was, I confess I did not attend. I still don’t know what it was about.

We should encourage the use of simple, clear language. I am not advocating the “dumbing down” of professional articles and books. It takes far more effort and intelligence to make complex ideas understandable to the lay reader than it does to couch them in such esoteric language that none but fellow specialists dare venture through the thicket of intimidating and tangled prose that has become commonplace in many scholarly journals.

There is a downside to this, of course—when our words have plain meaning, it is harder to duck responsibility or straddle the sides of a controversy. Using simple, clear language has not only the virtue of intellectual honesty, but also the advantage of increasing public interest in and comprehension of the best the humanities has to offer. And by making academic thought more accessible to the public, the wisdom of the humanities spreads wider and sinks deeper into the fabric of American thought.

The Humanities’ Future

The future of the humanities will depend largely on how we meet these challenges. We all have a stake, and a role to play, in advancing scholarship, defending the humanities, and meeting the challenges that beset us—whether they come from market pressures, ethical lapses, or self-marginalization.

At the NEH, we have recommitted ourselves to the core functions of the agency.

We have retooled our organizational structure to enable the excellent NEH staff to perform most effectively, and renewed our focus on the preservation, cultivation, and dissemination of the best of humanities research, scholarship, and public programs both on a national and state level. We reaffirmed the central role of scholarship in all our activities.

Some have questioned the viability of projects that seem to have only indirect or long-term benefits. *But, we will not neglect the basic scholarship that is the backbone of your work and ours.* Whether it is the translation of Sumerian tablets, the decades-long compilation of presidential papers, scholarly editions of works by figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, and Susan B. Anthony, or the completion of the Aramaic lexicon, *we will support basic scholarship just as vigorously as we support television documentaries that are seen by millions.*

Scholarship suffuses all our grant-making. From museum exhibitions to high school curriculum development, all of our programs are subject to rigorous review by scholars from the relevant disciplines. We are proud of our peer review system at the NEH, and have argued against any efforts to divert NEH funds to programs that are not subject to peer review.

I applaud the NAS’s effort and dedication. We at the NEH look forward to standing alongside you to ensure that the best of scholarship is valued, promoted, and protected.