

Humanists in High Dudgeon: The CFR-ALSCW Standoff

John Agresto

Published online: 11 April 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

When *Academic Questions* editor Peter Wood asked me to give some thought to the dispute between the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW), I thought I should say no.¹ The idea of slogging through another committee report on the sad state of American education seemed perfectly designed, through tedium added to gloominess, to make me unhappy. (I'm positive that the contrary to the old Italian saying that "one does not age when sitting at dinner with friends" is the knowledge that "every minute you spend reading reports and white papers takes a full half-hour off your life.") Couple that with a rebuttal by notable and important "scholars, critics, and writers" in high dudgeon over some or maybe all of the report... Well, let's say I resigned myself to plowing through it only because Peter is a friend.

Actually, *U.S. Education Reform and National Security* wasn't nearly as bad as I anticipated. Sure, the CFR report was longer than needed; and since it had to pass muster with a committee it was often less punchy or pointed than it might have been. It was—as a few of the ALSCW's rejoinders in "What Is

¹Joel I. Klein and Condoleezza Rice, chairs, *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*, Independent Task Force Report No. 68 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2012), <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/us-education-reform-national-security/p27618>. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text. Lee Oser and Rosanna Warren, eds., "What Is Education? A Response to the Council on Foreign Relations Report, 'U.S. Education Reform and National Security,'" *Forum: A Publication of the ALSCW*, no. 5 (Autumn 2012), http://www.alscw.org/publications/forum/forum_5.pdf. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

John Agresto is president of John Agresto and Associates, a consulting firm for secondary and higher education, 417 San Antonio Street, Santa Fe, NM 87505–2846; jagresto@newmexico.com. He served for eleven years as president of St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Prior to that he was assistant, deputy, and acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. More recently, Dr. Agresto was a founding trustee of the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani, chair of its academic committee, provost, and acting chancellor. He has taught at the University of Toronto, Kenyon College, Duke University, and the New School University.

Education?” mentioned—predictable in many areas. But, still, it turned out to be more interesting, more informative, more intelligent, and more civic-minded than most reports.

Well, what did the CFR report prepared by an independent task force chaired by Joel I. Klein, former head of New York City public schools, and Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. secretary of state, argue? That the dismal state of American precollegiate education leaves us in danger not only in the realm of global business and trade but also in terms of national security. We are, in other words, still a nation at risk, but the risks today are more widespread, deeper, and perhaps more existential.

As is appropriate, *U.S. Education Reform and National Security* looks first at education in an international context: “Young people,” it argues, “will need not only the skills outlined here but also a deep and diverse knowledge base about the world around them. The histories and foreign policies of other countries, the nature and function of the international system, and an understanding of the challenges and opportunities globalization offers—these could all be elements of a curriculum dedicated to shaping the globally literate citizens our civil service, military forces, economy, and society writ large will need” (xi).

Interestingly, though the report is surely about greater intercultural learning, it is blissfully free of all the Kumbaya pap that usually infuses today’s “multicultural” chatter. The report has no hesitation arguing that cultural studies can have a more appropriate aim than learning cultural relativism or beating up on America. Thus, “Americans’ failure to learn strategic languages, coupled with a lack of formal instruction about the history and cultures of the rest of the world, limits U.S. citizens’ global awareness, cross-cultural competence, and ability to assess situations and respond appropriately in an increasingly interconnected world” (47). Or, to put it bluntly, “The U.S. educational system is not adequately preparing its citizens to protect America or its national interests” (9). And, ultimately, “*America’s failure to educate is affecting its national security*” (3, emphasis in original).

In this regard, what many of us have always seen as the core of real multiculturalism—the serious study of foreign languages—is pushed hard by the report:

The Task Force does not argue that *all* U.S. children should begin studying strategic languages and cultures. However, the opportunity to learn these languages and about the people who speak them should be

available to many students across the United States, and *all students* should have access to high-quality foreign language programs starting in the earliest grades. If all Americans grew up proficient in at least one language in addition to English, and if instruction about other countries' histories and culture were built into the standard K–12 curriculum, young people would develop better understandings of world cultures and be better equipped to converse, collaborate, and compete with peers worldwide. (p. 47, emphasis in original)

And it's not simply international awareness that the report stresses, but (sacre bleu!) American history, civics, and a better understanding of American ideals and institutions. What our schools must teach—and what they now teach so poorly—is “a strong understanding of their nation's democratic values and practices” (14). “In civics, [only] a quarter of American students are proficient or better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.... This leaves most twelfth graders unable to describe how laws are passed, unfamiliar with landmark Supreme Court decisions, and unsure of the functions of the U.S. Constitution or the Bill of Rights” (15). In brief, it's not simply that we are not preparing our students for international understanding, our schools “are not adequately preparing students for citizenship” as Americans either (14). Couldn't have said it better myself.

Moreover, while I may take issue with the reliance on the efficacy of continual “testing,” with the excessive faith in technology as a pedagogical tool, and with the misplaced support of the Common Core State Standards, I was cheered by the support for greater school choice and, honestly, by the fact that nowhere in the report does the task force pretend that more money thrown at the schools will fix the problem. These things, coupled with the call for wider language learning, civics, and a better understanding of America as well as other nations, led me to be more than modestly pleased with the CFR report.

But, now enters the ALSCW in various poses of sanctimony and pique: “[T]he CFR report [is suffused with a] demand that all K–12 education be subordinated to the aims of ‘producing’ better future soldiers, commanders, and security analysts, as if expecting our country to maintain a state of perpetual militarized alarm if not outright warfare” (5).

“[T]he ancient Greeks distinguished between merely technical training (‘skills,’ we might say) and true education which... was based on a vision of the human being as a virtuous, cultivated, ethical person, someone capable of abstract reflection and also of practical wisdom, realizing the full possibilities

of human nature” (5–6). “The CFR authors seem, by contrast, to regard people as units of merely instrumental value in larger systems of corporate production and military defense” (6–7).

Indeed, the CFR report, we are told, seems “[p]reoccupied with staffing up the military-industrial complex” (19). Furthermore: “The language itself betrays an overriding concern with producing hands for industry and the state” (18). Why, when the authors of the CFR report talk about support for our economy and our country, does the rejoinder categorize it as “hands for industry and the state”? I guess “industry” sounds more sinister than business or the economy and “the state” has some desired totalitarian overtone when, in truth, all the CFR report was hoping to do was be of help to America—to the country, not to “the state.”

This mantra gets repeated and repeated: “What the authors of the Report [who are “Governmental bureaucrats”] assume is that students are ultimately cogs in a national machine intended to generate profit and power” (28). The report was “instigated” by “a lawyer, Joel Klein, who spent a little over a decade as an education administrator, and by two leaders of the foreign-policy elite, Richard Haass and Condoleezza Rice, both...better known for their proximity to power than for services to education” (33). The report is “shallow,” “slippery,” “irresponsible,” replete with “repellent features” (34, 6); it is the result of “corruption of mind” and “intellectual bankruptcy” (35). Wow!

Not all of the ALSCW rejoinders in “What Is Education” have this character or this tone, but there’s enough misdirected nastiness and self-important twaddle that it cannot be glossed over. Indeed, one might wonder if part of the reason the liberal arts have fallen on such hard times is that so many “humanists” come across not only as unpleasant and mean-spirited academics superior to “bureaucrats,” teachers, and other professors who differ from them, but also as sequestered intellectuals who care more about the future of their trade (no matter how narrow, specialized, and insignificant their fields might have become) and are indifferent to the honest needs of the country and contemptuous of those who would seek to help.

Still, whether vitriolic or mild, one theme seems to run through all the ALSCW rejoinders: Almost all the essays take the CFR report to task for what is seen as its “severely pragmatic” direction, for its “sternly utilitarian ethos” (24, 5). Or as one essayist writes, “Yes, it is important to prepare young people for the current world, but...” (29).

What follows that “but” are both thoughtful and less thoughtful reflections on the value of the liberal arts, especially of literature.² But in lumping much of their criticism under the banner of anti-utilitarianism, virtually all of the essays still miss the most crucial point of *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*. The ALSCW essays all attempt to show how an education in the liberal arts is of high personal value, how it makes the student more thoughtful, more discerning, no doubt happier, perhaps ultimately even more wise. But the thrust of the CFR report is to push in a different, and equally valuable, direction. It tries to see what good such an education is not only for some of us but for all of us. Real, solid traditional liberal education is both a private good *and* a public good. Good for individuals as well as for the country. It leads us, indeed, to ask the questions so many liberal artists hesitate to ask: questions of practicality and use.

In saying those two words—practicality and use—I can see humanist hackles flaring throughout this fair land. Our studies are purposely not “of use.” Our studies are pursued “for their own sake.” We don’t care if you think we’re “irrelevant”; our studies were never meant to be a means toward other ends.

And so begins the defense of a rather Greek and gentlemanly view of the liberal arts, a view not without merit, but a view (to speak somewhat pragmatically) that has led humanists simply to lose their audience.

There are many reasons why the liberal arts have fallen on hard times. We can blame the economy, parents, the allure of commerce, the philistinism of students... The list is long, and much of it true. But the perennial question of every aunt and uncle—“I’m happy that you’re majoring in medieval history/lyric poetry/classical Greek *or* gender studies/criticism/the literature of colonialism and rebellion, but what, exactly, will you DO with that?”—is hardly an unfair or snarky question. It not only evidences a concern for the future of the student (yes, including his material future), but also concern for all of us together. Everyone knows what good the study of medicine and nursing, or agricultural science and civil engineering, is for society. But the public is to be forgiven if it doesn’t make an immediate connection between being an expert in, say, literary criticism and the health of the country. And getting on our high horse and looking down on others as philistines doesn’t help.

²Two short pieces especially stand out quite positively—“Losing Battles,” by Michael Prince of Boston University and “Some Modest Objections,” by Virgil Nemoianu of Catholic University. In both pieces, the defense of liberal learning is high-minded yet specific, and suffused with a desire to help the country while reforming and improving our students’ education.

So, let me propose something: I know my liberal arts friends and colleagues have a hard time speaking the language of “use.” They’ve had it drubbed into them from prep school that they inhabit the world of the “liberal” arts, while others are—to use a word mentioned by one of the ALSCW responders—students and practitioners of the “servile” arts (18). (Do you realize how creepy those words “servile arts” sound in this country?) But, even if we cannot get our humanist mouths to utter words of use or practicality or service, can we not make the attempt to show the *value* of our studies and our disciplines? And I don’t mean, primarily, their personal value but their *societal* value?

Oddly, despite the hesitation to speak of the uses of the humanities, our very own colleges do speak that way at times. Students are forever being told that majoring in the liberal arts will make them employable over a whole range of occupations. How often do we try to sell the humanities as the most useful preparation for whatever professional school might come next? How often does the director of admissions say that a liberal arts graduate is not simply prepared for certain professions, but for any and all professions! But when a report intimates that there might be some real public value, even existential public value, to our study of foreign languages or the history or culture of other nations—or some benefit to the whole community from having something more than a superficial understanding of our nation’s history, ideals, and institutions—well, that’s “utilitarianism.” No, to uncover and defend the uses—the value—of liberal education for America is not “utilitarianism”; but disparaging the attempt by so labeling it is humanistic hogwash.

Here’s the thing, and the virtue of the CFR report is that it helps push us along this path: after so many years of narrowing our disciplines, of substituting trendy and ideological studies for the broad sweep of literature and ideas, after so many self-inflicted wounds that made our disciplines seem puny and irrelevant, we in the liberal arts now have the opportunity to show how relevant, how useful, how valuable our studies are *for all of us*, not just for the few, the lucky few, who get to study in them. Everyone knows how valuable nurses and cabinetmakers and farmers are to society. Can we not, as humanists, make a similarly convincing claim for our usefulness as well? If we cannot, then why should we have any hope that we will prosper?

I say all this not to criticize the study of the liberal arts, but, I hope, to help restore them. Too pure a view of these arts, too ancient and aristocratic a stance, will increasingly position our fields to lose in a nation that has always

been dedicated to the useful, the practical, the material, and the necessary. Besides, in the long and good history of liberal education in America, we never enforced so rigid a divorce between our studies and their usefulness. Was it narrow “utilitarianism” for Madison to study the history of ancient confederacies in order better to shape our Constitution? Wrong for Lincoln to see the usefulness in learning Shakespeare’s histories or the cadences of the King James Bible in order more ably to inspire a whole nation? Wrong, indeed, to hope that the study of foreign languages and serious cultural studies will produce better diplomats for America or political philosophy produce better statesmen and politicians or history give us better fellow citizens or the arts more agreeable neighbors and friends?

I know that in our universities—where literary criticism has overtaken literature proper, where Shakespeare is sexist, where the Bible is seen as a handbook for patriarchy and homophobia, and where Aristotle is turned into an apologist for slavery and the Founding a case study in racism—it’s hard to find high-mindedness much less anything of use in these our newly revamped fields. But it might be worthwhile again to show the country, show mothers and fathers, and show students themselves that the study of the liberal arts, properly understood and restored to their rightful grandeur, are not simply of personal benefit or esoteric private enjoyment but are and have always been of inestimable value to society.

All of us devoted to liberal education today have the opportunity to do at least two things. First, we can dedicate ourselves to reformulating a defense of the liberal arts, especially the humanities, that rests on something other than platitudes. Stop with the “We make you well-rounded” or “we make you more humane” or “we educate the whole person.” Think through—in concrete terms and not vague sentiments—what exactly our great value might truly be both as thinking individuals as well as a society. Second, we can take this opportunity to reform our great endeavor—to say goodbye to all the fringe, irrelevant, tendentious, ideological/political “studies,” all the graduate school specialization and narrowness that so weigh down and corrupt the liberal arts these days. Let us demand of ourselves that we all speak persuasively of our worth, our relevance, our value to the nation, to the culture as well as to the life of the mind. No opportunity to purify ourselves and thus to strengthen ourselves should be missed, and this is such an opportunity.

If not, then prepare to see liberal education fall even further by the wayside.