THE SIDNEY HOOK MEMORIAL AWARD PRESENTATION

From time to time, the National Association of Scholars bestows the Sidney Hook Memorial Award on a distinguished scholar, honoring a notable contribution to the freedom and integrity of academic life. On Saturday, 17 April 1993, at a ceremony held in San Francisco, California, during its fourth national convention, the NAS was honored to present the third Sidney Hook Memorial Award to C. Vann Woodward, the dean of American historians and Sterling Professor Emeritus of History at Yale University. We are pleased to print Dr. Barry R. Gross’s presentation address and Dr. Woodward’s acceptance speech.

Presentation Address

Barry R. Gross

This afternoon it is my privilege to introduce the third Sidney Hook laureate, the distinguished historian C. Vann Woodward, who receives the award for his outstanding contributions to the freedom and integrity of the academy. Mr. Woodward is a past president of both the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, a winner of the Bancroft prize and the Pulitzer prize, and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy; and he has gathered other honors too numerous to mention. Mr. Woodward’s long successes at explaining the American South to himself and to his fellow countrymen have made him today the dean of American historians.

From Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel to The Battle for Leyte Gulf, to The Strange Career of Jim Crow to Mary Chestnut’s Civil War, through to his remarkable and prescient essays in The Burden of Southern History and his pieces in The New York Review, Mr. Woodward has lent his eloquent and sometimes ironic pen to great causes.

Barry R. Gross is professor of philosophy at York College, City University of New York, Jamaica, NY 11451, and president of the New York Association of Scholars.
For such writings and for such thoughts he has been justly celebrated. But it is not for these things that we celebrate him here today. We celebrate Mr. Woodward this afternoon because he has lent his prestige to another great cause and written eloquently in its defense. I hope you will indulge me as I read some of what he has written in defense of academic freedom. These writings go to the heart of what a university is and to the heart of what the National Association of Scholars is about.

In 1975 a remarkable report was issued: Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale. Mr. Woodward was the chairman of that committee and the shaper of its report. Fittingly it has come to be known simply as “The Woodward Report.” In his “Chairman’s Letter to the Fellows of the Yale Corporation,” Mr. Woodward deplored the eventual direction of the “Free Speech Movement” at Berkeley and hoped that, though directed to Yale, the statement of the report would inspire other universities.

In issuing the full report Mr. Woodward was truer to his ideals than most people know. For the committee received a “Dissenting Statement” after its deliberations were concluded and the report was written. Unfazed by the coup de théâtre, the committee under Mr. Woodward’s direction printed this statement at the end of its report exactly as received though its sentiments went completely counter to those of all the members save the author of the dissent, and though he waited to spring his unpleasant surprise from what, to an observer, can only seem bad faith.

In a memorable exchange of letters in The New York Review, in 1991, Mr. Woodward once again came to the defense of his principles:

...the purpose of the university is not to make its members feel secure, content, or good about themselves, but to provide a forum for the new, the provocative, the disturbing, the unorthodox, even the shocking—all of which can be profoundly offensive to many, inside as well as outside its walls....I do not think the university is or should attempt to be a political or a philanthropic, or a paternalistic or a therapeutic institution. It is not a club or a fellowship to promote harmony and civility, important as those values are. It is a place where the unthinkable can be thought, the unmentionable can be discussed, and the unchallengeable can be challenged. That means in the words of Justice Holmes, “not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought we hate.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you now the man who wrote those words and thought those thoughts, the third Sidney Hook laureate, Mr. C. Vann Woodward.