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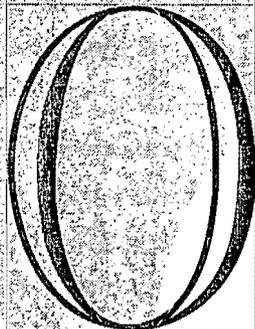


ENDOWMENT

FOR THE HUMANITIES

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is an independent federal agency that promotes research, education, preservation and public programs in history, literature, philosophy, foreign languages and other humanities disciplines. Since 1965 the Endowment has encouraged individual and institutional excellence in the humanities by awarding grants that support scholarship in America's schools, colleges, universities, libraries, museums, public television and radio stations and other cultural institutions.

NATIONAL
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O V E R V I E W

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PROGRAMS
1994

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DATE March 10, 1994
TIME 7:00-8:00 PM
NETWORK PBS
PROGRAM The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour

JIM LEHRER, co-anchor:

Finally tonight, we begin a series of conversations on American values. It is prompted in part by a call for a national conversation to counter rising ethnic tensions in this country. That call came from Sheldon Hackney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Over the next few weeks, Charlayne Hunter-Gault will talk to a variety of people, starting tonight with Sheldon Hackney himself.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT reporting:

Sheldon Hackney's path to the National Endowment for the Humanities was an academic one, and not always a smooth one at that. He's a historian by training. He started at Princeton University, was president of Tulane University and president of the University of Pennsylvania from 1981 to 1993, and it was at Penn that Hackney became the focus of a controversy that drew national attention.

In January of 1993, a white student, Eden Jacobowitz, yelled out of his dorm window at a group of black women, telling them: "Shut up, you water buffaloes." The black students complained and a university judicial board charged Jacobowitz with racial harassment. Jacobowitz claimed that the term "water buffalo" was of Hebrew derivations and had no racial connotations. Some of the Penn faculty supported Jacobowitz and urged Hackney to stop the proceedings. The women eventually withdrew their complaint.

In the spring of the same year, black student protesters, angered by a conservative student columnist, destroyed all 14,000 copies of Penn's student newspaper, The Daily Pennsylvanian, claiming it was racially sensitive. Hackney's response--"Two important university values--diversity and open expression--seem to be in conflict"--was seen as ambiguous by some and crushing free speech by others.

Despite these incidents and defying predictions, Hackney was easily confirmed as chairman of the NEH. It was in his first major speech as chairman that Hackney proposed that NEH sponsor a national conversation. Recently, we explored this idea with Sheldon Hackney at his office in Washington.

Sheldon Hackney, thank you for joining us.

Mr. SHELDON HACKNEY (Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities): Oh, my pleasure, Charlayne.

HUNTER-GAULT: You are proposing that Americans engage in a national conversation. I want you to first of all--because some of your critics have

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said a national conversation is a contradiction in terms--explain what you mean by that and why you think it should happen.

Mr. HACKNEY: The subject is what attracted me first to the notion that the nation really needed to think carefully about what it is that we share as a--as a people. We're very diverse, from various backgrounds and there has been a sense recently of a sort of a fraying at the edges of the American identity. People feel less attached to the society and they sense that in other people. We know that on college campuses there's a lot of friction among ethnic groups and racial groups, we know that there's been a good bit of violence in society among different cultural groups, and there is a good bit of attention being paid to sort of the moral structure of America. So I--I thought that it was time that Americans paused to think very carefully about what values they share. What--what do we mean by being an American these days as we face the 21st century? And the only way to do that is to get Americans to talk to each other so that they can come to some conclusions rather consciously about what it means to be American.

HUNTER-GAULT: Do you think there is something, some animal known as an American, that we can define? I mean, that...

Mr. HACKNEY: I think so. I think so, though I don't know what it is. I don't have an answer for this question, but I think it's an important question and it's worth pursuing, and I don't have any particular outcome for this. The important thing is that Americans talk to each other and learn from each other about the meaning of being an American.

HUNTER-GAULT: Well, you said you can't define, perhaps, what an American is, but what are some of those values?

Mr. HACKNEY: Well, I think it begins with the political system, if you will, a belief in democracy, the values that are in the Constitution. We don't always honor those values completely, but they're ideals that most Americans really hold very dear, and we pursue those values, we have for 200-and-some-odd years now. And one way to think about American history is that it is the story of the progressive realization of the promise of democracy that is stated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We're getting closer and closer, but we're not there yet. Maybe we'll never be there, but the pursuit is quite important.

HUNTER-GAULT: Now, some observers have said that Americans are, you know, groping, now that the end of communism has removed our major enemy, that we've lost our identity and that, you know, there's a real feeling of anxiety about who we are and what we do and what we represent.

Mr. HACKNEY: I agree with that because the enemy is one of the things that has made Americans willing to submerge their own individual self-interests from time to time in order to do something for the common good, and it's that loss, I think, of the willingness to look carefully and sacrifice for the common good that seems to be at issue here. There are other things as well, though. The president has been talking recently, for instance, about values, deter--deterioration of the family, of the loss of the work ethic, and he says

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that family structure has been eroding for 30 years. I think that's probably right, that--and that's because of various forces that are at work in modern life that are working against the family...

HUNTER-GAULT: Right.

Mr. HACKNEY: ...in the economy. The--I think the economy is a big one, the fact that we--growth has not been very robust in the last 15 years and individual income, family income has been stagnant, therefore more partners, wives and husbands--we have two-family--two workers in every family now.

HUNTER-GAULT: When you were president of the University of Pennsylvania, you got into really hot water over a few incidents on campus. Did you learn any lessons from that as you talk about trying to guide the nation now in a discussion of values?

Mr. HACKNEY: Well, I did. I did say that these two values at the University of Pennsylvania in that incident where were somewhat in conflict. I went on immediately to say that it's quite clear what the dominant value should be on any university campus. Free speech is the paramount issue and the paramount value in a university context. If you don't have that, you really don't have a university. Colleges and universities are working more than any other part of society now to make pluralism work, if you will, to make the diversity of America come together in a unity. But it's hard. It's very hard.

HUNTER-GAULT: You--what do you--I mean, you've been seen as a kind of even pillar, as a kind of...

Mr. HACKNEY: The pope of political correctness.

HUNTER-GAULT: Yes, and the symbol of liberal orthodoxy. I mean...

Mr. HACKNEY: Not true.

HUNTER-GAULT: ...do you think that you got--well--but that's the perception in some camps. How do--I mean, do you think that's going to stand in the way of--of you being able to reach out to conservatives and to people who, you know, feel that you have a set of values that are at issue--at odds with theirs?

Mr. HACKNEY: I don't think so. You know, there may be some who will not want to come into the conversation because they're suspicious, but I don't think many. I--I really don't have an outcome--a particular outcome in mind. It is a conversation in which all voices need to be heard, left, right and center, and we're going to structure it that way and encourage participation. What the Endowment intends to do is to inspire organizations all over the country--libraries, museums, schools, state Humanities Councils--in every state there is a state Humanities Council, and in the six territories--we want to inspire them and provide some financial support so that they will conduct programs, bring people together face-to-face and talk about this subject.

HUNTER-GAULT: Well, what kind of questions are you going to ask and who's

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going to devise them?

Mr. HACKNEY: Well, the questions will grow out of the conversation itself. We--we will be suggesting some questions as it's framed. What does it mean to be an American? What values do Americans share? Fairly broad questions. There are some examples of public-policy issues that really are driven by the notion of what it means to be Americans.

HUNTER-GAULT: Give me an example.

Mr. HACKNEY: Immigration policy is an obvious example.

HUNTER-GAULT: Now, spell that out for me.

Mr. HACKNEY: Well, should--should the borders be open? We are a nation that's been formed primarily by immigration, and the borders are not really open. There have been sort of periods of more or less constraint on those coming in, both how many and who. Before getting to that kind of divisive public-policy issue, it would be good for Americans to have some clearer sense of who we are as a country and who we want to be. That's the--that's really the purpose of the conversation.

HUNTER-GAULT: One of the--one of the skeptics talked, for example, about Washington, DC...

Mr. HACKNEY: Yes.

HUNTER-GAULT: ...and how people in this town are so invested in--their professional identities are so invested in particular points of view that they've argued in the past that they can't get beyond that. Do you share that? Because what you're talking about is trying to break beyond ideology.

Mr. HACKNEY: Absolutely.

HUNTER-GAULT: How--what--how do you get beyond that?

Mr. HACKNEY: Well, I think we get outside the beltway first and get Americans involved in the conversation. I think this has got to be a conversation among people rather than simply among politicians or leaders.

HUNTER-GAULT: But there have been critics who say that this effort is politically motivated and that it's window dressing at taxpayers' expense. How do you respond to that charge?

Mr. HACKNEY: I think the humanities are very important in American life in general, and this is a way of deriving some real benefit from the humanities, showing what a humanistic perspective can do to enrich life and to let one work through a really fundamental problem for most Americans now and come to a conclusion. So I think it's--rather than being a frill, it's right at the core of current concerns.

HUNTER-GAULT: Others have identified the pitfalls and have put some of them

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to you. What--what--what do you see as the potential pitfalls that you're going to have to leap over?

Mr. HACKNEY: There is a possibility this will fail, that--in a sense, that it simply won't work, that people will participate, but they won't get much out of it. I think that is a real possibility. I actually don't worry about that much. There's also a possibility that I worry about more, that talking about it will make it worse. I think that's the real--the real risk.

HUNTER-GAULT: In what way? That it will lead to further polarization?

Mr. HACKNEY: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's a sad commentary if that's true, but if it is true, it means that we have even greater problems than I imagined now, so I think it is worth the risk.

HUNTER-GAULT: You talked about the--the need to redefine who an American is, and I know there's been quite a bit of debate and controversy over the hyphenated Americans--African-Americans, Irish-Americans and so forth and so on.

Mr. HACKNEY: Yes.

HUNTER-GAULT: Where do you think that fits into this discussion?

Mr. HACKNEY: I think that's the heart of the conversation, basically. You know, what position do you take on them? There are people who believe that we ought not to have any hyphenated Americans, that we should look forward to a time in the future when we all assimilate, that there are no more cultural distinctions among Americans. There are others who think that those cultural distinctions are so important that we ought to fix them in place by some sort of legal recognition so that there are--that America is really composed of a set of cultural groups--that is, African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans or Korean-Americans specifically.

A third model would be my personal preference, but this is to be determined--would be some way of thinking about America in which there is an American identity that everybody shares, no matter what their--their cultural identity, but that is in a culture that recognizes one's cultural identity as well. You don't have to be--we're all occupying several identities anyway, so why not a national identity and another cultural identity? I am a Southerner myself, a white Southerner, but I'm also an American. I think those are slightly different things.

One--one common way of thinking about this, a traditional way, if you will--a traditional liberal way--liberal--in the small "L" liberal--Jeffersonian system--is that there is a public sphere and a private sphere. In the public sphere, we come all as individuals, each of us treated equally, according to the Constitution, but as individuals, and in the private sphere, there is room for you to be something else. You can be part of a group, and those group identities can be given form and voice, and they are to be relished and celebrated because that's what makes America very rich.

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HUNTER-GAULT: Well, Sheldon Hackney, thank you.

Mr. HACKNEY: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

Organizing a National Conversation

IT HAD HAPPENED AGAIN. I had been telling a group of city planners, architects, housing experts, and urban designers about what the National Endowment for the Humanities is doing to create a public sphere in which Americans can discuss serious questions affecting national life. I had been describing "The National Conversation," the NEH's special initiative that seeks to bring the American people together in their local communities to discuss important questions about American pluralism—what holds our diverse society together, what values we need to share if we are to succeed as a democratic society, what it means to be American as we approach the 21st century. Suddenly, it became clear that I ought to stop talking and start listening.

The "conversation" then took off. Most people in the group expressed opinions or observations with lively engagement. They did not all agree with each other, but they saw immediately how the subject affected them. Home ownership, equal opportunity to pursue the American dream (defined variously), democracy and its several correlates, individualism and the right to be different were among the cultural values quickly advanced as offering the key to the American identity. The importance of class and the looming presence of social-justice issues that threaten to alienate citizens from the body politic came up repeatedly.

As I and other NEH staff members have listened to numerous similar gatherings, we have gained a clearer sense of how a national conversation might be structured so as to examine the most challenging aspects of American pluralism.

The high point for me in the exchange with the city planners came in response to my suggestion that existing metaphors for the national identity did not work very well. The "melting pot" not only does not account for the cultural persistence of "pre-American" identities, but it also implies the obliteration of these "roots," which millions of Americans find meaningful in their lives. Yet the American "mosaic" or "quilt" implies the sort of sharp and permanent boundaries between groups that neither reflect reality nor are consistent with the sort of individual liberty and mobility that many Americans value highly.

A member of the group eloquently offered jazz as the ideal metaphor for America. It is a truly indigenous art form, he argued, evolved out of the interaction of European and African cultures in the New World. As befits a democratic society, it was created from the bottom up, is non-hierarchical in both its performance and appeal, and began as a disdained expression of a marginal group, slowly being taken into the mainstream. Most importantly, jazz emphasizes the improvisation of individual performance within a group setting. This contribution was not a bad piece of improvisation itself. Heads nodded around the room.

For the umpteenth time, what had been intended as a straightforward report on the mechanics of the NEH initiative exploded into a discussion of the substance of the subject itself. Something is going on here. It is, I believe, that a critically important topic is being opened up. People's fascination with it is fueled by communal strife around the world and by racial and ethnic friction from South Central Los Angeles to Bensonhurst, from Libertyville to the World Trade Center Tower.

After I appeared on a C-Span interview program at 8:30 a.m. on the East Coast, we got calls from all over the country. One was from a man in a remote village in Colorado who wanted us to bring the conversation to his town, which is experiencing gridlock because various racial and ethnic groups have not found a way to work with each other. We got a call from a woman in a public-housing project in Albany, N. Y., who wanted to conduct a conversation in her building. We got another from a librarian in Brooklyn and one from the

mayor of a culturally diverse Southern city. We are overwhelmed by phone and mail inquiries from people who want to participate.

Now, in the interest of honesty, I must confess that not everyone has been enthusiastic. Some on the left fear that defining American identity will reimpose some sort of troglodytic, patriotic, Euro-American conformity harking back to the anti-immigrant "Know Nothing" political movement in the mid-19th century, to the Ku Klux Klan, and to McCarthyism. On the right, some fear that the conversation is a camouflaged promotion of multiculturalism in its most ideological manifestation, denigrating whites while granting special privileges to people of color. Such fears could not be further from the truth. The fact, however, that these fears surfaced so quickly after we announced the national conversation is another bit of evidence that we are dealing with a topic linked to some powerful rip tides and undertows in contemporary life.

I now have conducted pilot discussions around the

"We must find a way to illuminate the subject with the wisdom of the humanities without bleaching the color out of an emotionally chromatic dialogue."

country (in Detroit; Garden City, Kan.; Houston; Lowell, Mass.; Oklahoma City; and at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina), as well as with six sets of NEH staff members and numerous unsuspecting groups who invited me to meet with them for other purposes. I am more convinced than ever that the conversation is timely—but I also recognize some inherent risks.

The conversation might not be able to attract participants much beyond the circle of folks who watch "Great Performances" on public television, although our intent is to be vastly more extensive and inclusive than that. We will work hard to engage the minds of Americans struggling with the difficult aspects of national identity in their everyday lives.

FOR EXAMPLE, we are planning a film designed to "open up" the subject of American pluralism in stimulating and informative ways. It is intended for broadcast on national television but also will be repackaged for use in the nation's classrooms. We anticipate working with the state humanities councils to help them extend their programming on the topic of pluralism. We hope to build creative partnerships throughout the country with churches, community centers, libraries, community colleges, museums, unions, and other organizations that serve segments of the population that are sometimes overlooked. These partnerships can help to stimulate and facilitate the discussion among citizens from all walks of life.

I have learned many things from the pilot discussions. For instance, a degree of trust must develop before important emotional issues emerge, so groups must meet over a long enough period of time to allow that trust to develop. Since there is no agreed-upon vocabulary with which to conduct the conversation, the terrain is booby-trapped with potentially insulting terms and with phrases that mean different things to different people. Discussion leaders must be able to use these "flash points" as opportunities to advance the conversation.

As we use mass communications to broaden the conversational circle, oversimplification and polarization

could hinder real communication. We must work to avoid that.

I also have learned that most people understand the subject of American pluralism more quickly if it is described not in terms of abstract concepts, but rather in terms of concrete problems or examples (immigration policy, bilingual education, Afrocentric curricula, what is to be admitted to the canon in college-literature courses, redistricting to insure minority representation on city councils or county commissions, declaring English to be the official language of a state). We must find a way to illuminate the subject with the wisdom of the humanities without bleaching the color out of an emotionally chromatic dialogue. This will require imaginative selection of texts, visual materials, performances and activities that can be used to focus discussions. A program of grants will be set up to invite organizations throughout the country to be as creative as possible in linking people in conversation with each other.

This will be a risky enterprise, because the NEH comes only with questions—not answers. As a group of scholars who were brought together by the MacArthur Foundation to help plan the national conversation see it, the first question and the last is, "What is an American?" That, however, is such a protean question that the scholars are fashioning several clusters of inquiries that will probe the nooks and crannies of the idea of America.

For instance, is it useful to distinguish between spheres of life in which society treats us simply as individuals (in voting or employment) and spheres of life in which society recognizes us as members of distinctive groups (families, churches, social clubs, ethnic self-help organizations)?

ONE MIGHT ALSO WONDER about the implications of the fact that we are all members of different communities and groups at the same time. What does it mean in America to be a "hybrid," to be the child of several racial, ethnic, or nationality groups? What is the meaning of tolerance in a pluralistic society, and does it mean that we must approve of everything other groups do?

When we talk to each other, some people are heard and others are not. Why is that? How should we resolve conflicts and disagreements? What sorts of differences of opinion can we leave unresolved?

We talk a lot about equality of opportunity. What does that mean in different areas of life?

How important is it in a pluralistic society to have a common culture? What should our schools teach our children about being good citizens? How should history be understood in a society such as ours? Should we have a shared vision of the good future?

What can we learn from other societies about cultural pluralism? What can we learn from foreign visitors to the United States? What can we teach to other societies?

Given these large and important questions, the outcome of the national conversation is unpredictable; it is contingent on the course of the discussions and on what we learn from each other as we talk. I am convinced from my experiences thus far, however, that a great reservoir of good will and good sense exists in the land. Once people are brought together to talk and listen, the question they generally ask at the end of the discussion is: "How can we continue to meet and pursue this subject?"

I invite everyone to join us. With or without an NEH grant, create your own version of the conversation. You will be amazed by what you discover in conversation with your fellow Americans.

Sheldon Hackney is Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506



February 24, 1994

A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

AMERICAN PLURALISM

As Sheldon Hackney announced on November 10, 1993, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., the National Endowment for the Humanities intends to initiate a National Conversation on the nature of American pluralism. It is designed to engage a significant proportion of the American people in discussions about questions such as, "What does it mean to be an American in a nation of people from diverse backgrounds? What holds us together? What do we value?" The conversation will be launched in the fall of 1994.

The conceptualization and planning began last fall. Information and advice has been and will be obtained through a series of discussion meetings, including six held at NEH among the Endowment's staff, one for invited scholars to be held March 4-6 in Chicago, and five involving citizens from diverse backgrounds to be held throughout the country (see attached), as well as focus groups. Two major meetings, including the Chicago meeting for scholars, are being held in March. Both will assess the findings of the groups and develop plans on the conceptualization and implementation of the initiative. The scholars at the Chicago meeting this weekend have thought and written about American pluralism. The other meeting, to be held in Washington, D.C., will include humanities professionals and scholars who have participated extensively in public programs.

The conversation will include three major types of activities: 1) those conducted directly by the Endowment, such as commissioning the production of a documentary 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 agencywide special initiative calling for applications on the topic in all divisions; and 3) related activities funded and conducted by other groups and institutions.

The conversation, although in many ways a new idea, is in fact already occurring in many towns, villages, and cities around the country. The idea of "a public space" in which the conversation can take place is being developed in museums, in libraries, and in civic centers and is being expanded upon by colleges, universities, and city officials. Based on the response that the National

Endowment for the Humanities has received by phone, mail, and persons stopping by, there is a huge interest out there yet to be tapped. As Chairman Hackney has noted on a number of occasions, "A National Conversation" is coming at a time when public interest in the topic seems to be growing steadily and will hopefully create a more civil environment, a public space, and a chance for Americans to communicate, one to one.

The principal components of the plan are listed below:

Components and Responsibilities

1. Scholars Group (Chicago)
To examine and help define the questions and identify the printed materials for the conversations.
2. Public Humanities Group (Washington, D.C.)
To examine and advise the Endowment on implementation methods.
3. NEH Staff Discussions
To experiment with various approaches to discussing American pluralism and to gather information for subsequent planning.
4. Pilot Citizens' Groups
To experiment with various approaches to discussing American pluralism and to gather information for subsequent planning.
5. Focus Groups
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
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
To plan and implement a special initiative for NEH, inviting proposals in all programs.
8. Telecommunications
To commission the production of a film and to plan other means of using telecommunications, e.g., electronic town meetings, INTERNET, or other electronic means.

9. State Councils
To design a special collaboration with state humanities councils and the Federation on the conduct of the conversation.
10. Partnerships
To encourage, directly and indirectly, activities funded and conducted by other agencies and groups.
11. Foundations
To solicit the financial and operational assistance of foundations.
12. Printed Materials and Publicity
To write and produce the "kit," printed materials for the national conversation, including a bibliography.
13. Promotional Tour
To plan and conduct a series of city- and communitywide activities at selected sites throughout the nation in the early fall 1994.

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Amy E. Schwartz

Hackney Comes Out Swinging

Let it never be said of Sheldon Hackney that he failed to come out swinging. The new National Endowment for the Humanities chairman had been accused en route to the job of everything from political correctness to outright moral vacuity, and you might have expected him to steer clear—at least for a while—of the vexed matters that made his confirmation process so unpleasant. Instead, Hackney used his first major public speech last week at the National Press Club to fling his new agency directly back into the fray, saying it should take on the responsibility of directing “a national conversation” in which “we must grapple seriously with the meaning of American pluralism.”

Such a debate, which attentive listeners might point out is already raging on every side with no help from Hackney, isn't exactly a new project for the humanities endowment either. Nor is it an ideologically bounded endeavor: Hackney's highly partisan conservative predecessor, Lynne Cheney, with her very different vocabulary, was doing something comparable when she announced a special, quite generous subcategory of grants for projects on “the emergence of democracy,” an initiative that eventually gave out more than \$2.5 million. But Hackney, in Cheney's wake, inherits a slightly different landscape. There's no doubt a “national conversation” on ethnicity and equality these days is proceeding at deafening volume; but it's being conducted in shouts and insults and without visible progress forward. Aside from the humanities endowment's useful machinery, Hackney brings one tool that could prove invaluable in lending the debate that driving edge: a grudge.

As president of Penn, Hackney took flak for prose that was mealy-mouthed and turgid on the matter of free speech and race relations. But either the new job has freed him from inhibitions or anger at his own treatment has made him fluent. “Current public debate is little more than posturing,” he told the press club, not mentioning his confirmation but leaving the allusion obvious. “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 debate. . . . 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.”

What sort of a “conversation” might build agreement? Hackney proposes to use NEH contacts and a “modest but significant amount” of money to create a framework for a series of debates, local and perhaps electronic, that would “change the rules of engagement for this national conversation” on what divides Americans and what unites them. It would do this in large part by introducing—gasp—humanities and history, by pulling in scholars (the MacArthur Foundation has

He proposes a “national conversation” to replace a “drive-by debate” on what divides Americans and what unites them.

expressed interest) and by posing questions in a focused way. The endowment and its shadow organization, the National Federation of State Humanities Councils, already have some experience in funding such things as state- or town-level seminars on the writings of Thomas Jefferson, or reading-and-discussion groups that struggle through a series of texts on religion in public life. An organization that's basically a history and humanities teaching institution may also be well suited to reviving the old-fashioned insight that people will get further with concepts such as pluralism, especially unexpected turns that give them trouble, if they're given the chance to work through them on their own.

An NEH-nudged version of this debate needs to dodge two large strategic pitfalls. One is the condescension pitfall, the urgent need for Hackney to make clear that he realizes this debate is already going on, that his framework would not fill a void but (at best)

add structure and order in a raging jungle. The debate on “who we are as a nation and what holds us together” is not just, as Hackney puts it, a discussion that “the American people are desperate to have” but, on the contrary, a discussion the American people are always having in some form or another. And not just the American people, either. It would be foolish to shut the national ears to the urgent babble of discovery on this very question that's swept across the newly liberated countries, where our hoariest issues are new, live and dangerous in a way that ought to help Americans regain lost inspiration.

The other pitfall has to do with Washington itself and with a fallacy common to those who arrive here—the notion that they have come to a place where people are uniquely open to argument and self-questioning on the big political issues. Such new arrivals are often heard to say eagerly that they are glad to be in a place of rigorous, reasoned discourse on a philosophical plane and that they look forward to conducting an interesting policy debate. Hackney, like some better-left-unnamed chairs of both endowments of the recent past, should beware: Washington may be the hardest place in America to promote thoughtfulness among those already in the debate, since nowhere else are people's lives and professional identities so thoroughly invested in the views they have argued in the past. Those who engage in what they are pleased to call “the culture wars” from a Washington command post—the think tankers, the newsletter editors, the right-wing and left-wing foundation fundees—reach a point quite soon where they are beyond serious self-questioning. Those who have been heard or published loudly on this debate are in no position to allow an intriguing new argument to persuade them. If it did, they would have to switch jobs.

So while a truly illuminating series of, say, town-meeting debates among thoughtful and visible people could be a great conversation-starter, it will probably do best in communities far from here. Which is fine, anyway, because that's where it's likely to matter whether we get a handle on our ever wilder problems of pluralism.

The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.

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16 Section 1 ▽

Monday, March 14, 1994

America, can we talk?

Everybody complains about the sorry state of racial and ethnic relations in America, but nobody does anything about it.

Well, not exactly everybody and not exactly nobody.

Some people—David Duke, Louis Farrakhan and others of similar inclination—seem not at all bothered by the group antagonism, if they don't actually welcome it.

And there are many individuals and organizations across the country who work actively to foster understanding and amity across lines of race, ethnicity, religion and other categories.

Nevertheless, the overriding impression that America gives nowadays is of a nation that, while not at war with itself—we are not yet Yugoslavia, thank God—is not at peace either.

Sheldon Hackney thinks there is help for this predicament in the humanities—actually, in the National Endowment for the Humanities, which he heads.

Hackney proposes to use the endowment to foster what he calls a “national conversation” about the dilemma posed by the rise of a so-called “new tribalism” in a nation whose fundamental philosophical premise is that rights are individual.

Based on his handling of several contentious incidents when he was president of the University of Pennsylvania, Hackney did not seem the most auspicious choice to head the humanities endowment. But if he can bring off this “national conversation,” he will have vindicated his appointment.

The nation desperately needs intelligent, honest, open discussion of these issues. And that discussion needs to go beyond the groves of academe and the

editorial pages to which it is usually confined.

(In that regard, Hackney needs to get over what seems a disturbingly elitist aversion to television and find ways to use that medium to involve the broad masses of Americans who will never attend a conversation at the local public library or civic center.)

Hackney sketched the outline of the proposed national conversation in a speech last fall at the National Press Club in Washington.

“We find ourselves caught in a dilemma,” he said. “The dilemma is that our legal rights are for individuals, but our politics are for groups.”

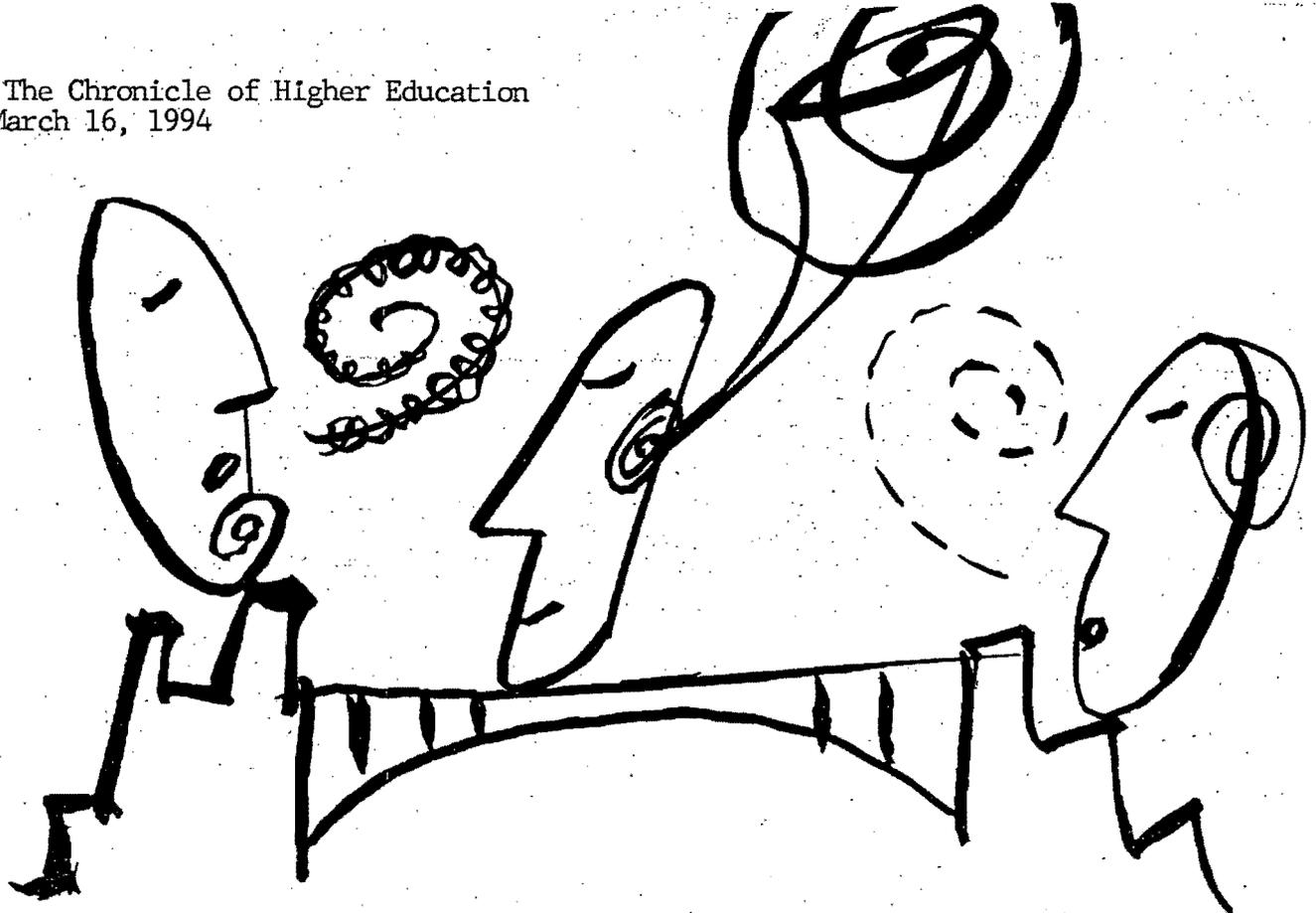
The tension between those two facts of American life is reflected in public debates over everything from the holidays we celebrate to the content of school and college curricula to the drawing—germymandering?—of electoral district lines.

Some people assert that any concession to group identity is a betrayal of the founders' constitutional legacy. They ignore such inconvenient facts as the three-fifths clause, the institution of slavery, the Jacksonian democracy movement, the Civil War and the nation's rich history of urban ethnic politics.

Other people see “individual rights” as a ploy to frustrate claims of historically victimized groups. They ignore such powerful examples of the dangers of group rights as South Africa, Bosnia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Burundi—where group identification has led to discrimination, repression and slaughter.

It's time both sides of this debate—and all the positions in between—were ventilated broadly and at length, and for the benefit of all Americans.

Let the national conversation begin.



DAVID WHITMORE FOR THE CHRONICLE

A Conversation, Not a Monologue

By Catharine R. Stimpson

AMERICANS are beginning a "national conversation" about their adamant pluralisms. Earlier this month, a group of scholars met in Chicago to answer the call of Sheldon Hackney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, for citizens to enter into a dialogue about their national identity. The MacArthur Foundation organized the Chicago meeting to create a scholarly framework for inclusive, free-wheeling discussions to consider questions such as, What do Americans share as a people? And what do they not?

Predictably, ever since Mr. Hackney called for a national conversation, critics from the right and the left have wanted to squelch it. Some have worried that such a conversation will seek to impose a spurious uniform identity; others that it will merely celebrate diversity.

These criticisms miss the point. We must enter into such a conversation for one compelling reason. The refusal to live peaceably in pluralistic societies is one of the bloodiest problems—nationally and internationally—of the 20th century. No wizard, no fairy godmother is going to make this problem disappear. And I retain a pluralist's stubborn, utopian hope that people can talk about, through, across, and around their differences and that these exchanges will help us live together justly.

We must, however, be realistic about what conversations within civil communities can and cannot do. Whether carried out in writing, by speaking, or through other media, conversations are hard work, made harder by our frequent ignorance about each other. Moreover, the conversing parties must have at least an iota of good will toward each other.

In various academic circles, "conversation" now has an elevated status that mingles cult and cant. The word is banded about, but with little hard thought about what a conversation actually entails. Some humanists use the word to describe their professional enterprise, evidently finding conversation more epistemologically sophisticated than "the quest for truth." Many administrators and conference organizers use the words "dialogue" and "conversation" as though they were the bright Lego blocks of community building.

Conversation also has become part of the mantra of pop psychology, which holds that it will magically solve all problems,

heal all wounds, and facilitate the meeting of all true minds. "Retreats," preferably in pastoral settings, will stimulate the verbal flow. The shy will abandon their anxieties. The prolix will hold their tongues. Representatives of all cultures will have the same commitment to the therapeutic benefits of public chatter. And the power-hungry—even the power-hungry—will munch on the nougat of togetherness.

WE NEED to get beyond the jargon and consider how to design realistic discussions on campus and in society. My years of support for women's studies and multicultural programs have taught me that discussions are useful for three related reasons. The more voices that enter into a conversation and the greater their diversity, the more helpful the discussion is. In brief:

■ Conversations are a pragmatic tool for examining truths about the world and about each other. In 1906 and 1907, the philosopher William James delivered the lectures that became the book *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. How, he asked, do we get to the true and the real? By what processes of thinking and naming? "All human thinking," he answered, "gets discursified; we exchange ideas; we lend and borrow verifications, get them from one another by means of social intercourse." Along these

"The more voices that enter into a conversation and the greater their diversity, the more helpful the discussion is."

lines, the absence of the voices of women of color hurt women's studies in the 1970's. The presence of their voices today has made the analysis of women and gender far more complex, far more accurate.

■ Conversations weaken totalitarian perspectives. Doing so, they are a condition of cultural democracy. In 1910, three years after James's lectures, Jane Addams published *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, an autobiographical account of the great settlement house in Chicago that she had co-founded and led. The book describes many kinds of conversations—including those carried out about economics in the weekly meetings of the Working People's Social Science Club. Holding the discussions together, Addams writes, were two convictions: first, that free speech is good, and second, that the "representatives of various economic schools might modify each other, and at least learn tolerance and the futility of endeavoring to convince all the

world of the truth of one position." Addams concluded: "Fanaticism is engendered only when men, finding no contradiction to their theories, at last believe that the very universe lends itself as an exemplification of one point of view." The political equivalent of non-fanatical conversation is negotiation, the more or less peaceful settling of our differences.

■ Psychologically, conversations permit catharsis, the helpful release of feeling rather than its risky repression. Such catharsis is one aspect of an even larger process that the philosopher Charles Taylor discusses in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition."* As people enter into a dialogue and talk things out, he says, they must recognize and try to respect the identities of others. Simultaneously, these acts of recognition help to clarify participants' own identities. We become fully human as we engage in these dual activities, he says. Within women's studies, for example, as white women like me recognize

women of color respectfully, we also learn how much our own "whiteness" has shaped us.

In the last few years, in academe and in society at large, many groups have begun to build the foundation on which to conduct serious conversation. Mr. Hackney's initiative promises to become the most nationally visible of such efforts. Around campuses, groups of individuals work in different locations—private homes, classrooms, faculty offices, committee rooms, disciplinary meetings, or on e-mail—to discuss issues that divide us. Like many such grassroots activities, they lack a tidy structure and organization. Together, however, these groups make up an "evolving center" in higher education. We must nurture their growth—and protect them from some extremes of behavior and rhetoric.

This evolving center practices what I call "the new decorum" in conversation, a way of speaking and a way of acting. A national conversation should embody its features. The new decorum values scrupulous learning—from books, the street, and each other. It asks us to listen across different cultures and disciplines. It respects originality of insight and also an awareness of both history and other opinions. The new decorum realizes that conversations can flare into arguments, but it subscribes to certain rules of argument. The theologian David Tracy says that these rules include respect for the sincerity of others, a willingness to weigh all relevant evidence, and a willingness to abide by the rules of validity and coherence.

No matter how vigorous the argument, the new decorum prizes a final moderation of tone. Moderation is not the coward's way of avoiding passion, judgments, or

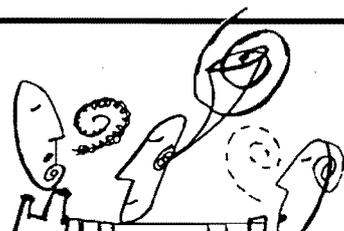
housed, and ill educated. Some tenure or administrative positions in colleges and universities or cushy posts in think tanks. The conversation stoppers shout at the extreme edges of the evolving center.

Let me give but two examples of unpalatable, conversation-stopping monologues. One, that of the "total victim," is heard on the left and the right. The total victims on the left portray themselves as crushed by the malign forces of a sex or a race. Total victims on the right claim that they are being smothered by standard-smashing, merit-bashing, freedom-hating radicals—many of them gays or lesbians.

THE OTHER MONOLOGUE, that of "total identity," is also used by both left and right. On the left, these monologists reduce the multiple complexities of individual and group identities to one source of identity—be it race or sex. On the right, the source of identity is flattened to a monolithic "Americanism." Participants in the evolving center know, however, that few people in a pluralistic society are total victims and fewer still can claim that one word alone signifies their identity.

Woefully, the monologues often approach violence, either when they attack "the oppressor" or call for self-defense. Like many other people, I smell an increase in the stench of potential violence in the November 1993 speech of Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam at Kean College of New Jersey, with its nightmarish attack on Jews, Catholics, all white South Africans, and homosexuals. Nor are white people who claim to represent American identity at its best exempt from playing with the fires of violence. Recently, I watched the C-Span coverage of a panel on political correctness at the 21st

"I retain a pluralist's stubborn, utopian hope that people can talk about, through, across, and around their differences."



commitments. Nor is it the liberal pluralist's way of smoothing out tensions to achieve an "I'm ok, you're ok" consensus. Rather, the moderate realizes that virtue is the pockmarked, fraught, contested way between two extremes. This moderation is apparent in multicultural curricula that strive to teach not one culture, but human similarities, differences, and cross-connections.

DECORUM also is not a synonym for remaining imprisoned in conventions. Rather, it is the capacity to recognize the nature of all conventions and to assess which matter, to whom, and why. In a wonderful essay on the political poetry of John Milton, the literary critic Janel Mueller writes that decorum for Milton is "the articulation of possible and appropriate choices." That is the challenge for the practitioners of the new decorum as they attempt to make almost impossible choices about our pluralism: Which aspects of our pluralism do we want to support? Which work, for individuals and for groups? Which do not?

If our new attempts at conversation are to succeed, we must also reject attempts of indecorous "conversation stoppers" to engage in monologues rather than discussion. These conversation stoppers do not belong to the legions of the ill fed, ill

Annual Conservative Political Action Conference. Red, white, and blue bunting draped the table at which the panelists sat. At least a score of American flags stood at attention behind them. Speakers repeatedly demonized gays and lesbians and called on conservatives to "take back" the campuses and country from deviants and deviant-loving liberals. Among the panelists was a sharp-featured, verbally agile MTV video jockey who goes by the single name Kennedy. "Can't we," she asked to thrilled approval, "just start beating up the liberals on college campuses?"

Take care, Khalid and Kennedy, take care. American pluralisms may be adamant, but like diamonds, blows and violence can crack, shatter, and break them. If local and national conversations about pluralism are to work, those of us in the evolving center must speak up energetically. We must challenge and even laugh at the conversation-stopping monologues. With caution and hope, let us renew our tongues.

Catharine R. Stimpson, on leave from Rutgers University, is director of the Fellows Program at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. She participated in the recent meeting in Chicago. This piece expresses her views, not those of the foundation.

A National Conversation That Avoids 'Ideological Warfare'

By Stephen Burd

THE National Endowment for the Humanities pulled off a victory last week when it convened a group of scholars to plan its "national conversation."

The endowment, long criticized for being tied to one side or the other of the nation's culture wars, managed to involve leading scholars from across the ideological spectrum, and nobody was injured.

"There were no culture wars that I could discover," said Diane Ravitch, a fellow at the Brookings Institution who was Assistant Secretary of Education in the Bush Administration. "People who argue a lot in print seemed to be enjoying a love-in. It was essentially the first great love-in of the '90's."

DISCUSSING DIVISIVE ISSUES

The conversation is the brainchild of Sheldon Hackney, the endowment's chairman. He wants to bring citizens together in groups to talk in intelligent ways about divisive issues. Mr. Hackney would like these conversations to explore the nature of an American identity.

The group of 21 scholars spent a day and a half in Chicago wrestling with questions of American pluralism and diversity. The meeting was closed to the public.

The panelists were asked to frame questions to define aspects of American identity and pluralism that most need examination.

Those questions are to be used as a guide by the NEH to judge which projects should receive sup-

port through the conversation program.

By all accounts, the meeting was a success. The most surprising, and pleasing, aspect to many observers was just how diverse a group Mr. Hackney invited. "Hackney has to be commended in achieving a balance," said Stephen H. Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars and a frequent critic of Mr. Hackney. Mr. Balch was not a participant.

The scholars included advocates of multiculturalism such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chairman of the Afro-American Studies department at Harvard University; Renato Rosaldo, professor of anthropology at Stanford University; and Ronald Takaki, professor of Asian-American studies at the University at California at Berkeley.

Also invited were critics of multiculturalism such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a professor of history at the City University of New York, and James Q. Wilson, professor of management and political science at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Mr. Hackney also included Richard Sennett, a professor of theory and culture at New York University, who has publicly criticized the idea of a national conversation. In *The New York Times*, Mr. Sennett wrote of the dangers of trying to forge a national identity.

AVOIDING THEORY

According to Harvard University law professor Martha Minnow, panelists agreed that the conversa-

tions should avoid theoretical conceptions. "Abstract questions will not move the conversation as well as immersion in concrete problems, case studies, and works in literature, which offer the level of detail which will allow participants to understand perspectives besides their own," she said.

The group also recommended that the NEH support conversations that last for a significant amount of time as opposed to "one-shot meetings," she said.

Others who participated in the Chicago meeting are:

William Galston, deputy assistant to President Clinton for domestic policy.

Mario Garcia, professor of Chicano studies and history at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Nathan Glazer, professor emeritus of education at Harvard University.

Amy Gutman, director of the Center for Human Values at Princeton University.

Bennetta Jules-Rosette, professor of sociology at the University of California at San Diego.

Stanley N. Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies.

Martin Marty, professor of modern Christianity at the University of Chicago.

Martha Nussbaum, professor of philosophy, classics, and comparative literature at Brown University.

Rennard Strickland, director for the Center for the Study of American Indian Law and Policy at the University of Oklahoma.

Michael Walzer, professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study.

Iris Marlon Young, professor of public and international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh.

Jamil Zainaldin, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

Ofella Zepeda, associate professor of American Indian studies at the University of Arizona at Tucson. ■

FACTS

National Endowment
for the Humanities

A Federal Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20506

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THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is an independent federal agency that supports research, education, preservation projects and public programs in the humanities.

What Are the Humanities?

The act that established the National Endowment for the Humanities says "The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life."

The Endowment's Mission

Created by Congress under the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, NEH provides grants to individuals and institutions for projects in the humanities. Grants support research and educational opportunities for humanities professors, independent scholars, and elementary and secondary school teachers; the writing and publishing of scholarly texts; translations of important works in the humanities; and museum exhibitions, television and radio programs, and other public programs that offer examination of ideas and themes in the humanities.

How NEH Is Administered

The Endowment is directed by a chairman, who is appointed by the President and confirmed by the U.S. Senate for a term of four years. Advising the chairman is a National Council of 26 distinguished private citizens, also presidentially appointed and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, who serve staggered six-year terms.

Sheldon Hackney is the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He was sworn into office on August 4, 1993.

Competition and the Review Process

NEH grants are awarded on a competitive basis. In the most recently completed fiscal year, the Endowment funded about one out of every five applications received. Funding decisions are made on the basis of the application's merit and the significance of the project.

Each application is assessed by knowledgeable persons outside the Endowment who are asked for their judgments about the quality and significance of the proposed projects. About 1,200 scholars, professionals in the humanities and other experts serve on approximately 250 panels throughout the course of a year. Panelists represent a diversity of disciplinary, institutional, regional and cultural backgrounds. In some programs the judgment of panelists is supplemented by individual reviews from specialists who have extensive knowledge of the specific area or technical aspects of the application under review.

The advice of evaluators is assembled by the staff of the Endowment, who comment on matters of fact or on significant issues that would otherwise be missing from the review. These materials are then presented to the National Council on the Humanities, which meets four times a year to advise the chairman. The chairman takes into account the advice provided by the review process and, by law, makes the final decision about funding.

The Endowment's Programs

NEH awards grants through six divisions -- Education Programs, Fellowships and Seminars, Preservation and Access, Public Programs, Research Programs and State Programs.

From its creation in 1965 through the end of Fiscal Year 1993, the Endowment awarded approximately \$2.6 billion for nearly 50,000 fellowships and grants. Some of these grants have required one-to-one matching funds from private-sector donors and have been matched by more than \$293 million in nonfederal contributions. Grants made by the NEH Challenge Grants Program, requiring \$3 or \$4 in matching funds for each federal dollar, have generated nearly \$1 billion in nonfederal support for America's libraries, colleges, museums and other eligible humanities institutions since the program began in 1977.

Jefferson Lecture and Charles Frankel Prize

In 1972 NEH established the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual and public achievement in the humanities. The 23rd Jefferson Lecturer will be poet and novelist Gwendolyn Brooks. She will deliver her lecture on May 4, 1994, in Washington, D.C., and on May 11, 1994, in Chicago.

In 1988 NEH established the Charles Frankel Prize to recognize persons for outstanding contributions to the public's understanding of the humanities. The 1993 winners of the award are Ricardo E. Alegria, John Hope Franklin, Hanna Holborn Gray, Andrew Heiskell and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich.

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Remarks at Vanderbilt University
by Sheldon Hackney
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities
Nashville, Tennessee
March 30, 1994

Why does it matter who we think we are, either individually or collectively? What difference does it make what image of America is shared by its citizens? The idea of America, though always more rooted in aspiration than reality, has pulled this experiment in democracy forward from the first toward its dream of "liberty and justice for all." That dream, the same one Martin Luther King Jr. spoke so eloquently about at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington in 1963, has powered one of the noble stories of America, the story of the expansion of the promise of American life to embrace increasing proportions of its citizens. The idea is tutor to the act.

Archibald MacLeish, in an essay published in 1949 as a warning against the mounting hysteria of anti-communism, wrote, "The soul of a people is the image it cherishes of itself; the aspect in which it sees itself against its past; the attributes to which its future conduct must respond. To destroy that image is to destroy, in a very real sense, the identity of the nation, for to destroy the image is to destroy the means by which the nation recognizes what it is and what it has to do. But the image a people holds of itself is created not by words alone or myths but by its actions. Unless the actions are appropriate to the image, the image is blurred. If the actions deny the image, the image is destroyed. ... A people who have been real to themselves because they were for something cannot continue to be real to themselves when they find they are merely against something."

The question I raise today is not so much about actions that are inconsistent with our image of ourselves as about what we are going to be for now that we don't have "the evil empire" to be against? Do we have a clear and an adequate image of ourselves in the post-cold-war world, given all the threats to political stability and human welfare both foreign and domestic, given the dangerous fragmentation of a world in which the closeness imposed by modern communications and the global economy has reemphasized the differences within the human family? What is the United States going to be for in the 21st century? What picture of an ideal America is going to inform our struggles with current problems? What notion of shared commitment, mutual obligations, civic virtues, will help us come together to solve common problems?

Writing a few days ago in *The New York Times* (March 27, 1994), Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard University put the challenge of Minister Louis Farrakhan and his hate-mongering disciple, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, in perspective by quoting Rabbi Yaacov Perrin's eulogy for Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the man who massacred worshipping

Palestinian Muslims in Hebron: "One million Arabs are not worth a Jewish fingernail."

"But we have heard this voice before," Gates writes. "It is the voice of messianic hatred. We hear it from the Balkans to the Bantustans; we hear it from Hezbollah and from Kach. We hear it in the streets of Bensonhurst. And, of course, we hear it from some who profess to be addressing the misery of black America." Professor Gates goes on to connect these and other examples of murderous utopianism to the weaknesses of liberalism and to less lethal forms of what he calls identity politics.

"There has been much talk about the politics of identity," Gates writes, "a politics that has a collective identity at its core. One is to assert oneself in the political arena as a woman, a homosexual, a Jew, a person of color. ... The politics of identity starts with the assertion of a collective allegiance. It says: This is who we are, make room for us, accommodate our special needs, confer recognition upon what is distinctive about us. It is about the priority of difference, and while it is not, by itself, undesirable, it is, by itself, dangerously inadequate."

Glancing around our nation now does not give one much réassurance. Not only does Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam travel from campus to campus spewing bigotry and leaving divisive squabbles in his wake, but a few weeks ago the National Conference of Christians and Jews released the results of a survey of race relations commissioned by them and done by Lou Harris. The results revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that among Anglo-Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans, disturbingly high percentages of each group held negative stereotypes of each of the other groups. So much for the myth of "the new majority," the idea that people of color are united against Euro-Americans. No wonder the village square these days is full of sound and fury.

As effective as the politics of difference have been in bringing previously excluded groups into the mainstream of American life (one might, in fact, say because the politics of difference have been so effective in giving formerly silent groups access to the national public address system), rancorous debates are increasingly occupying our attention.

Take for example the angry debates in state legislatures around bills to make English the official language of the state, an act that is primarily symbolic and is emotionally resisted for that very same reason (19 states have such laws; Maryland just turned down an "official English" bill). The growing debate over immigration policy will be no less clamorous. From South Central Los Angeles to Crown Heights, from Libertyville to the recent assassination on the Brooklyn Bridge, tensions among racial and ethnic groups in the United States are in volatile condition.

That this is more than academic is clear if one recalls the hand-to-hand combat within school boards involving such issues as bilingual education and 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 in the legislative body. In most 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.

Furthermore, how is one to embrace cultural equality when one is aware of so many practices one does not admire: polygamy, genital mutilation, the subordination of women in various other ways, the rejection of life-saving science, authoritarian social structures, ethnocentric and racist beliefs, etc. On what occasions and in what circumstances should the practices of cultural minorities give way to the general society's rules, regulations and expectations? At the same time, how can an inclusive American identity be defined so as not to obliterate the particular cultural identities that make America's diversity so enriching? These are complex matters that require careful thought.

America, of course, has always been diverse and its diversity has always been problematic, which is the reason for our motto, "E Pluribus Unum." We take pride in the fact that our nation rests upon a commitment to individual equality and democracy rather than upon ethnicity, but we worry about cohesion, and we bounce back and forth along the continuum between the assimilation implied by the "melting pot" myth and the persistence of pre-American cultural identities assumed by the metaphor of the national quilt or the mosaic.

What is our image of the America of the 21st century? What kind of America do we wish to be? Is America to become, as Arjun Appadurai worries (*Public Culture*, Spring, 1993), a collection of exiled groups whose members have loyalties only to their own group or perhaps to the homeland rather than to the United States? Are we to be a nation of exiles rather than a nation of immigrants? Should our image be of an undifferentiated America of "melting pot" individuals without any hyphenated identity? Can it be an America of shared values and commitments that nonetheless retains the modulation of cultural differences, an America in which we are all American AND something else? Can we define what Henry Louis Gates calls "humanism," which starts not with a particular identity "but with the capacity to identify with. It asks what we have in common with others, while acknowledging the diversity among ourselves. It is about the promise of shared humanity."

Can we identify those values and commitments we need to share if we are to be a successful society? Is a belief in the Constitution and our political system enough to hold us together without violent friction between members of different groups? To what extent can any inclusive national identity enlist our loyalties if it does not squarely face the issue of social justice? If equal opportunity is to be part of the American ideal, shouldn't we talk about the extent to which it does not exist and how to bridge the gap between ideal and reality?

There is not one of our considerable number of social ills that would not be considerably improved if each of us felt a sense of responsibility for the whole. I was in Savannah, Georgia, not long ago visiting some NEH-funded projects, and I learned about an oral history project that is reclaiming the past of a residential community called Cuyler-Brownsville. One of the people interviewed remembered his childhood in that neighborhood. His memory was that it was the kind of place where "everybody's momma could whip everybody's kid." I can't think of a better definition of community or of civic virtue than that. Everyone looks out for everyone else, feels responsible for everyone else. It would be utopian to aspire to the same level of community spirit on a national level, of course, but some analogous sense of identification with the whole is needed.

Two things are required if each of us is to be willing to subordinate our individual self-interests on occasion to the good of the whole: we must feel a part of the whole, and we must see in that whole some moral purpose that is greater than the individual. Our problem is our inadequate awareness of what might be called the sacred order that underlies the social order and is the source of legitimate authority in the social order.

At an earlier defining moment in the nation's history, on the eve of the outbreak of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, speaking between his election and his inauguration in Philadelphia in Independence Hall where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution had been drafted, found the meaning of America in its mission of being the exemplar for the world of the ideals of human freedom and equality set forth in those great documents.

On that occasion, Lincoln said, "I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this [Union] so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that **all** should have an equal chance." It was not only about slavery but about slavery as a violation of the principles of democracy and the sanctity of the Union because with the Union rested the world's hope for democracy.

The Civil War thus became a test of whether democracy, with its promise of liberty and equality, could survive, whether the last best hope on earth could endure. Returning to this theme two and a half brutal years later at the dedication of the military cemetery in Gettysburg, Lincoln declared that defending the Union was worth the sacrifices exacted by that terrible struggle because the sacrifices made possible "a new birth of freedom."

The challenge of our time is to revitalize our civic life in order to realize a new birth of freedom. 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 what divides us capture the headlines and sound bites, polarizing us rather than bringing us together.

The conversation that I envision will not be easy. Cornel West, for instance, writes that "confused citizens now oscillate between tragic resignation and vigorous attempts to hold at bay their feelings of impotence and powerlessness. Public life seems barren and vacuous. And gallant efforts to reconstruct public-mindedness in a Balkanized society of proliferating identities and constituencies seem farfetched, if not futile. Even the very art of public conversation--the precious activity of communicating with fellow citizens in a spirit of mutual respect and civility--appears to fade amid the backdrop of name-calling and finger-pointing in flat sound bites."

Despite the difficulties, the conversation must proceed. The objectives are too important to abandon. What I envision is a national conversation open to all Americans, a conversation in which all voices need to be heard and in which we must struggle seriously to define the meaning of American pluralism. It is a conversation that is desperately needed, and the National Endowment for the Humanities is in the process of encouraging that conversation through a special program of grants, through a film intended for national broadcast on television but which will also be repackaged for use in the nation's classrooms, through the ongoing activities of the state humanities councils, and through creative partnerships with organizations throughout the country that can help to stimulate and facilitate the discussion among citizens from all walks of life.

This will be a risky enterprise, because the NEH comes only with questions--not answers. The outcome is therefore unpredictable, contingent as it is on the course of the discussion and on what we learn from each other as we talk.

However large the challenge, I believe we must reconstruct public-mindedness in America. Without a sense of shared values, individuals are not willing to subordinate personal self-interest

to the common good. Our first step out of the moral nihilism of our public and private lives is to define our common identity and to find in it a moral purpose that is worthy of our loyalty.

Fortunately, there is some evidence of the continuing power of the idea of America that has moved generations of our people to sacrifice in order to build a better life not just for themselves and people like themselves but for others, has called forth the best in Americans in national crises, that has enlarged our sense of ourselves so that we more nearly approximate the universal ideals set forth in our founding document. When the American Jewish Committee wanted to rally public support against the sort of intolerance being preached by the Nation of Islam, it called upon familiar rhetoric that reveals a particular conception of America and its civic values.

"We are Americans, whose diversity of faith, ethnicity and race unites us in a common campaign against bigotry," read the copy of the advertisement that ran in *The New York Times* (February 28, 1994) over an impressive and diverse array of leaders.

"We are Americans, who know the rights and dignity of all of us are jeopardized when those of any of us are challenged.

"We are Americans, who reject the ugly slanders of the hatemongers seeking to lift up some Americans by reviling others.

"We are Americans, born or drawn to this land, children of immigrants, refugees, natives and slaves, whose work together honors the history of the civil rights struggle and makes it live, for all Americans.

"In recent weeks, leaders of the Nation of Islam have gained wide attention for their verbal attacks on whites, women, Jews, Catholics, Arabs, gays, and African Americans who criticize their persistently divisive message.

"We, the undersigned, believe the best response we can give to those who teach hate is to join our voices, as we have so often joined forces, in a better message--of faith in each other, of shared devotion to American's highest ideals of freedom and equality.

"'We must learn to live together as brothers,' the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'or we will all perish together as fools. That is the challenge of the hour.'

"Together, we strive to meet that challenge. For with all our differences, we are indeed united, as Americans."

"Beyond the Culture Wars"
by Sheldon Hackney
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities
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.