



BRIDGING CULTURES

By Jim Leach

Nominated by President Barack Obama, Jim Leach began his four-year term as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in July 2009. Leach served 30 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he chaired the Banking and Financial Services Committee, the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, and founded and co-chaired the Congressional Humanities Caucus. In 2007, Leach joined the faculty at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School as the John L. Weinberg Visiting Professor of Public and International Affairs. In September 2007, he took a year's leave of absence to serve as lecturer and interim director of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at the Harvard University Institute of Politics. Leach graduated from Princeton University, received a Master of Arts degree in Soviet politics from the School of Advanced International Studies at The Johns Hopkins University, and did additional graduate studies at the London School of Economics. He holds eight honorary degrees and has received numerous awards for distinguished public service. An interesting Oklahoma side note: as a three-sport college athlete Leach was elected to the Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and the International Wrestling Hall of Fame in Waterloo, Iowa.

At a time when the world is in flux and the judgment of its leading democracy is in question, studies in the humanities have never been more important.

The United States is currently intertwined in two civil wars more than a third of the way around the world. In making assumptions about the wisdom

and manner of intervening in the affairs of other countries, would it be helpful for policy-makers to review the history of the French colonial experience in Algeria, the British and Russian experience in Afghanistan, the French and U.S. experience in Vietnam—before rather than after—a decision to go to war? Would it be useful to study the differences between and within the

world's great religions? And would any aspects of our own colonial history be relevant to decision making?

At issue today is a world struggling with globalist forces on the one hand and localist instincts on the other. Divisions are magnified at home as well as abroad. In this context, I have proposed that the

NEH, in concert with state humanities councils, initiate a “Bridging Cultures” program aimed at enlarging our understanding of America’s diverse cultural heritage and history, and that of other societies. Developing a sense for a common humanity is a moral and social imperative.

Military Strategy and Cultural Ramifications

Military strategy in the last generation has become increasingly sophisticated. But frequently left out of in-depth consideration have been cultural ramifications: the unintended consequences, particularly the aftereffects of intervention from the perspective of the society most affected and those in the world that share similar cultural traditions. At issue is not simply whether democracy is better than other methodologies of social organization and whether it can be readily imposed from the outside, but also the sobering question of whether good intentions can be counter-productive and lead to greater conflict, social disruption, and radicalization, and whether progressive transformation of any society is more likely to be achieved through means other than military intervention.

Strategic thinking that lacks a cultural component is inadequate for the times. Culture is more powerful than politics and surprisingly capable of withstanding change wrought disproportionately by force of arms.

In a set of four books called *The Alexandria Quartet*, British author Lawrence Durrell describes urban life in the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria between the first and second World Wars. In the first book, Durrell spins a story from the singular perspective of one individual. In each subsequent book, he describes the same events from the perspective of others. While the events are the same, the stories are profoundly different, informed by each narrator’s life and circumstances. The moral is that reality requires us to see things from more than one set of eyes—in a community, in a court room, or in international relations. What America does may seem reasonable from our perspective but look very different from the perspective of a European or African, a Middle Easterner or Asian. Adding the eyes and ears of others illuminates rather than narrows judgment.

Globalism vs. Localism

Albert Einstein suggested that splitting the atom

had changed everything except our way of thinking. But the events of 9/11 have taught that thinking must change not simply because of the destructive power of the big bomb, but because of the implosive nature of small acts. Violence and social division are rooted in hate. Since such thought begins in the hearts and minds of individuals, it is in each of our hearts and minds that hate must be checked and our way of thinking changed.

There is a lot written today about globalism, but this century is also about localism. To adapt to a fast-changing world, one must understand both of these phenomena—the fact, as Tip O’Neill repeatedly noted, that all politics are local and, a corollary, that all local decisions are affected by international events. Caution must be taken in assuming that advocacy of a compassionate cause can trump the desires of small states to make decisions about their own futures, even seemingly irrational ones.

The Merits of Civility

The poet Walt Whitman once described America as an “athletic democracy.” What he meant was that our politics in the 19th century was rugged and vigorous and spirited. Nativism—such as anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments and, of course, toleration of human degradation implicit in slavery and indentured servitude—“hallmarked” much of American thought and many of our social structures. So, uncivil behavior is nothing new. But in the context of American history, where change was wrought in the crucible of debate about the nature as well as the rights of man, little is more important for the world’s leading democracy than recommitting to an ethos of thoughtfulness in the public square. The times require a new social compact rooted in mutual respect and citizen trust.

Civilization requires civility.

The concept of civility implies politeness, but civil discourse is about more than good manners. At its core, civility requires respectful engagement: to consider other views and place them in the context of history and life experiences.

Comments on the House floor several months back involving advocates on both sides of the health care debate have gathered much attention, but vastly more rancorous, socially divisive assertions

are being made across the land. Public officials are being labeled “fascist” or “communist.” And more bizarrely—a hint of history-blind radicalism—the notion of “secession” is creeping into the public dialogue.

One might ask: *What is the problem with a bit of hyperbole?* To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan’s observation about the media, the logic is the message. Certain frameworks of thought define rival ideas. Other frameworks describe enemies. Stirring anger and playing on the irrational fears of citizens inflames hate.

Words matter. They reflect emotion as well as meaning. They clarify—or cloud—thought and energize action, sometimes bringing out the better angels of our nature, sometimes baser instincts.

Unlike natural physics, where Sir Isaac Newton pointed out that action equals reaction, in social chemistry, reaction can be greater than action. To label someone a “communist” may spark unspeakable acts; to call a country “evil” may cause a surprisingly dangerous counter-reaction. Polarizing rhetoric can exacerbate intolerance and perhaps impel violence. Conversely, healing language such as Lincoln’s plea in his second inaugural address for “malice toward none” can uplift and help bring society closer together.

In politics as in family, vigilance must be maintained to insure that everyone understands each other.

Vigorous advocacy should never be considered a thing to be avoided. Argumentation is a social good. Indeed, it is a prerequisite to blocking tyranny and avoiding dogmatism. The goal



NEH Chairman Jim Leach

should be to uplift the tenor and tone of debate and infuse it with historical and philosophical perspective. How we lead or fail to lead will be directly related to how we comprehend our own history, values, and diversity of experiences—and how deeply we come to understand and respect other peoples and societies. At issue is whether we perceive ourselves as belonging to a single American community with all its variety, and whether we look at people in other neighborhoods and other parts of the world as members of families seeking security and opportunity for their kin just as we do.

Citizenship is hard. It takes a commitment to listen, watch, read, and think in ways that allow the imagination to put one person in the shoes of another. Civilization requires civility. ■

These excerpts are taken from speeches given by Chairman Leach as he crisscrosses the country on a newly-launched “civility tour.” He will visit every state in the union to help initiate discussions about the state of American civility.

TEACHERS PRAISE ESSAY CONTEST

Winners of the 2010 Lincoln Essay Contest were honored at a reception at the Oklahoma History Center in April. State Representative Tad Jones was present and spoke on this year’s contest topic: the impact of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln’s legacy in Oklahoma. The contest is sponsored by OHC with support from BancFirst and Sonic. A complete list of this year’s winners and schools is posted on the OHC website: www.okhumanitiescouncil.org/lincoln-essay-contest.

students gained so much from this experience. Thank you very much.

—Diana Goodwin, Eufaula Elementary

We had a young man at our school named Seth (sixth grade) who suddenly passed away from a rare illness. It was heartbreaking for all of us. Morgan Jones [1st place winner, 4-6 grade essay] has decided to use the \$250 prize money to purchase books for the school library that Seth would have enjoyed, all nonfiction historical books. Thank you for giving students such an outstanding opportunity. I will definitely have students enter again next year.

—Cindy Parks, Duncan Middle School

What teachers say about the program:

Wow! I am so proud of my students. We learned and studied about Abraham Lincoln for over two weeks to prepare for this contest. I feel like my



Student winners of the 2010 Lincoln Essay Contest: [front row, from left] Zach Pratt, Seth Willis, Nathan Hopkins, Layna Solorzano, Curtis Taron, Brighton Potter; [middle] Henry Taverner; [back row] Emily Wilkie, Claire Thompson, Morgan Jones, Aaron White, Amy Hembree, Desiree Phipps, Ruth Toledo

Steve Sisney

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