

Remarks of Sheldon Hackney
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities
At the Annual Convention of the
American Historical Association
Chicago, Illinois
January 7, 1995

I come to you today still somewhat dazed by the events of November 8 and their aftermath, which are playing themselves out in the hyperbaric chamber that is Washington. Many meanings, both emergent and contingent, are contained in the current political situation and the public mood it reflects, and my interpretation is no better than the next lay person's attempt to make sense of this history-in-the-making. One theme is clear, however, and it is pertinent to our current purpose. In the primary conversation of American history between liberty and equality, liberty now has the floor.

I recall being intrigued by something that the poet, Donald Hall, said some time ago in his televised interview

with Bill Moyers. He recited a little poem and then explained it, only to be told by Moyers that the poem had an entirely different meaning to him. Hall confessed appreciatively that he had never thought of the poem in the way Moyers interpreted it, and then he said, "A poem frequently has at the same time the meaning the poet intended and the opposite meaning as well."

I was reminded immediately of Sigmund Freud's crack that neurotic symptoms are both punishment and reward, and I kept thinking about the implications of Hall's profound observation. It soon occurred to me that nature seems to be filled with examples of binary opposites that complete each other:

Male-Female

North and South poles of magnets, and of earth

The genetic code arrayed along strands of the double

helix

So it is with culture, especially American culture. For every strongly asserted trait of national character, the culture appears to produce, perhaps as a reaction formation, its opposite as well:

Belief in the common man – Celebrity

Hard Work – Get rich quick

Greed – Philanthropy

Materialism - Religiosity

Delayed gratification – Instant everything (rice, coffee, soup – we are the land of fast food, quickee divorces and drive-in churches)

The particular binary pair that interests me at the moment is the complex relationship between liberty and equality, and how that relationship affects our sense of being American. One might also observe that this can be viewed

as part of the romance of the many and the one, in which we all want to be recognized as unique individuals but we also want to belong to something that is larger and somehow more significant than we are as individuals.

Alan Wolfe of Boston University has noted the tension between liberalism, understood as personal freedom from governmental or other external constraint, and democracy, understood as the will of the majority. This is also the tension between the many and the one. Wolfe writes, "The predicament of liberal democracy is that liberalism denies the logic of democracy and democracy denies the logic of liberalism, but neither can exist without the other." Too much liberty, one might observe, is anarchy and leads to the tyranny of the strong; too much democracy is authoritarianism and leads to the tyranny of the majority. The required balance between freedom and order rests on a

mystical mutual dependence of the apparently opposing ideals of liberty and democracy. That balance is so important to us that we should worry when it threatens to go awry.

Scholars interested in the problems of contemporary life and in economic development have begun to focus on what they are calling "social capital." They distinguish social capital from "human capital" (education, skills, training, traits of character, etc.) and from "physical capital" (natural resources, roads, bridges, communications linkages, means of production, etc.). Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard University, did a study of regional governments in Italy to try to identify why some were successful and others were less so. The variations in success were not strongly correlated with any of the usual variables of human or physical capital (education, wealth, resources, etc.) Success

was statistically best explained, however, by measures of citizen engagement. Furthermore, the social networks of civic involvement seemed to precede rather than to follow the success. This implies that the most important thing in making a neighborhood or a society a wholesome place to live, and to provide improved life chances to those who live there, is citizen involvement – a vibrant "civil society."

This recognition of the importance of the village in the raising of the child would be unalloyed good news if it were not also true that in the United States almost every measure of civic involvement has been trending down for over two decades and is still in decline (voter participation, PTA membership, church attendance, visiting a neighbor, etc.). In an article entitled "Bowling Alone" in the current issue of the Journal of Democracy, Putnam makes a metaphor out of the curious fact that participation in bowling leagues is down

while individual bowling is up. This represents a pervasive and more serious phenomenon: contemporary Americans have fled from the public square.

We are living with a crisis of disaffiliation. We sit passive and isolated in front of our television sets, or at our computer terminals, or in our "edge cities" and suburbs, or otherwise in the pursuit of private and individual satisfactions. Our flight is both physical and psychological.

No wonder we are living with so much cynicism and distrust! The downward trend in measures of civic involvement over the past twenty-five years is mirrored in a Harris poll that has been taken continuously since 1966 and that shows a plummeting level of confidence expressed by the public in the presidency, the Congress, the news media, and in every institution in American life.

Just before the election, the New York Times ran a cover

story entitled "Antipolitics" in which the editors describe the public as being in a "sullen, surly mood." That mood is suggested in a series of stories, from which the reader could infer that the cause of the nasty public mood is to be found in such factors as stagnant living standards, rising crime, the proliferation of sources of news and thus the bombarding of the public with an overabundance of information, most of it negative, the dramatic rise in spending of special interest groups, gridlock in Washington, and impossibly high expectations of any President of the United States.

Those factors are undoubtedly real, but they are not sufficient to explain the long-term decline in American confidence as measured by the Harris poll (or a similar Gallup poll, for that matter). This is not the place to develop a complete explanation for what has been happening in America over the past three decades or more, but I believe

any adequate explanation of our current condition would have to begin with a recognition of the 1960s as a watershed in American history, a significant reordering of attitudes and relationships that have not yet been reintegrated into any sort of coherent notion of what the society is and where it is going.

The sixties were years during which "equality" and "liberty" were shouting at once and seemed to be saying the same thing. America took giant strides forward in social justice and inclusiveness, and countless subtle and no-so-subtle barriers to individual fulfillment were torn down. On the other hand, the sixties had a dark side as well: self-indulgence, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, and delusions of revolutionary transformation were prevalent. More important, even the positive changes had unintended consequences and perhaps unavoidable costs. The

divisiveness inherent in that kind of rapid social change left a residue that corrodes the bonds of social cohesion. All the social justice movements of the post-war era began in the decade of the sixties broadly defined, beginning with the civil rights movement ignited by the Brown decision in 1954, but including the women's movement, the gay and lesbian rights movement, the disabilities movement, the American Indian movement, and other movements on behalf of groups previously excluded from full participation in American life. These thrusts on behalf of social justice certainly ought to be seen as another proud step toward fulfilling the promises implied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, a step toward a closer approximation of the universal values in those great founding documents, but they also were occasioned by a great deal of social turmoil. The anti-war movement that was such a defining element of the

decade was incredibly confrontational, leaving tears in the social fabric that have not yet healed.

Furthermore, the counterculture that we sometimes think of primarily in terms of styles and taste in music and dress was more seriously a frontal assault on the verities of the middle class; epater le bourgeoisie was raised to a matter of ideological principle. As middle-class culture is marked by such customary beliefs and expectations as planning for the future, doing one's duty, postponing gratification, exhibiting deference to established authority, trusting the institutions of American life, and respecting one's elders; the counterculture urged us to live spontaneously and creatively without being imprisoned by the stultifying conformity of middle class life, not to trust anyone over thirty, to question authority, to recognize that human relationships are fleeting so self-actualization is the most important thing, and otherwise to

live for the moment. Whether you code it positive or negative, it was an entirely different orientation to the world. Even though it did not gain the adherence of anything close to a majority of the population, it did influence attitudes and values profoundly.

Then, in 1973-74, in a brief span of months, three events occurred that shook the confidence that America has traditionally had in itself. Watergate, the Arab oil embargo, and the full awareness that we would leave Vietnam without a victory. America's innocence, its traditional optimism, and its belief that all problems have solutions were fundamentally shaken.

Through the seventies and eighties, not only did the social justice movements continue to practice and profit from the politics of difference, but the individualism of rights-based liberalism competed with the individualism of material

greed. Christopher Lasch called it the "culture of narcissism" and Tom Wolfe dubbed the eighties the "me decade."

Missing from the public discussion was what Os Guinness laments as a "common vision for the common good."

Sixty years ago John Dewey wrote eloquently about our problem in his book, A Common Faith: "What Philosophers have got to do is to work out a fresh analysis of the relations between the one and the many. Our shrinking world presents that issue today in a thousand different forms. . . . How are we going to make the most of the new values we set on variety, difference, and individuality – how are we going to realize their possibilities in every field, and at the same time not sacrifice that plurality to the cooperation we need so much? How can we bring things together as we must without losing sight of plurality?"

Today, freed perhaps by the end of the Cold War and

the artificial cohesion provided by the presence of an external enemy, as we draw apart from each other in our private and self-indulgent pursuits, we grow suspicious of each other, and we become less capable of common action. It is a worry.

"Democracy begins in conversation," wrote John Dewey. It can not exist without a certain level of mutual trust, without citizens caring enough about the success of the whole to forego on occasion the rewards of atomistic competition. 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 that we belong to the whole, that our personal fate is bound up in the fate 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. To that end, the National Endowment for the Humanities is sponsoring a

"national conversation on American pluralism and identity," on what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century, on what principles and common commitments hold Americans together and make it possible for our ethnically and racially and culturally diverse society to be successful as a democracy. Where along the continuum from melting pot to mosaic are we to find the appropriate image to describe an American identity suitable for the twenty-first century?

Through a program of grants, a film intended for broadcast on public television and use in the nation's classrooms, an interactive bulletin board on the internet, a conversation kit that will be made available to anyone or any group that wishes to conduct its version of the conversation, the NEH seeks to bring together unprecedented numbers of Americans to talk and to listen to each other about shared values and the meaning of America (telephone 1-800-NEH-

1121 for information). It is a conversation in which all voices need to be heard and all points of view represented. Only in that way can we revitalize our sense of our communal 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 conversation and what we learn from each other as we talk.

However large the task, I believe we must reconstruct networks of mutual engagement of the kind that will serve as "social capital." We must revive public-mindedness. We must rediscover the truth that individualism is a group activity. We must create a public sphere in which Americans can discuss matters of mutual concern with each other. Without a sense of common belonging, we are doomed to narcissistic failure. Our first step out of the moral nihilism of

our public and our private lives is to define our common commitments and shared principles, and to find in our common identity a moral purpose that is worthy of our loyalty.

You may draw your own conclusions from our conversation. My own belief is that there is continuing power in the idea of America that moved Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., that has moved generations of our people to sacrifice in order to build a better life not just for themselves and for people like themselves but for others who are different, that 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 documents.

The sanctity of the individual and the promise of

individual rights contained in the Constitution are central to any understanding of the meaning of America, but I believe individualism by itself, the currently fashionable radical form of liberty, resting only on the entitlement of individuals to protection from the government and from other individuals, is an impoverished notion of America. We are not unidimensional creatures. We are not profit-maximizing animals. We can not live lives unencumbered by obligations to others

I believe, further, that there is an inclusive historical narrative in which we all recognize not only the stories of our kith and kin but in which we recognize that we all are playing roles in a common story, in which we are all linked to each other across barriers of time and boundaries of race, in which we share the shame of our mistakes and the glory of our achievements, in which the meaning of America is to be

found in the common ground of its aspirations of liberty and justice for all.

Sheldon Hackney
Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities
Remarks at the Museum Practitioner Seminar
George Washington University
March 15, 1995

By now we can all recite the litany of America's social ills: rampant crime, the dissolution of the family, too many children having babies, homelessness, stagnant incomes, the increasing disparity of wealth, more than twenty per cent of our children being raised in poverty, decaying urban centers, a persistent stratum of citizens ill equipped for employment in the new global economy, the AIDS epidemic, a crumbling physical infrastructure, and a national debt whose interest is consuming a huge proportion of annual tax revenues.

Whether as cause or effect, there is trouble in the spiritual realm as well. A recent Newsweek poll finds that three out of four Americans believe the United States is in moral and spiritual decline. A majority believe their children will live less well than

typical Americans are now living, and most citizens believe the country is on the wrong track. Just a year ago, the National Conference of Christians and Jews released the results of a survey of racial attitudes, asking a representative national sample a long list of questions about members of four broad groups: European Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans. The results were as disturbing as they were unsurprising. Distressingly high percentages of each group held negative stereotypes of the members of each of the other three groups. There is abroad in the land a feeling of fragmentation, isolation and the loss of social cohesion.

Among many others, Jean Elshtain of the University of Chicago believes that American democracy is in trouble. "Democracy," she writes in Democracy on Trial, "requires laws, constitutions, and authoritative institutions, yes, but it also depends on what might be called democratic dispositions. These include preparedness to work with others different from oneself

toward shared ends; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can't always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of one small group alone. But what do we see when we look around? We find deepening cynicism; the growth of corrosive forms of isolation, boredom, and despair; the weakening, in other words, of that world known as democratic civil society, a world of groups and associations and ties that bind."

This current worry is related, I believe, in a fundamental way to a central concern of American culture, the tension between the individual and society, between our desire to be recognized as unique individuals and our desire to belong to something that is larger and somehow more significant than we are as individuals. From the very first, we have struggled with the challenge presented by the fact of ethnic diversity and the need

for national unity – the problem of the many and the one. These delicate and oscillating balances are intimately bound up in our sense of being American.

Alan Wolfe of Boston University has also noted the tension between liberalism, understood as personal freedom from governmental or other external constraint, and democracy, understood as the will of the majority. This is also the tension between the many and the one. Wolfe writes, "The predicament of liberal democracy is that liberalism denies the logic of democracy and democracy denies the logic of liberalism, but neither can exist without the other." Too much liberty, one might observe, is anarchy and leads to the tyranny of the strong; too much democracy is authoritarianism and leads to the tyranny of the majority. The required balance between freedom and order rests on a mystical mutual dependence of the apparently opposing ideals of liberty and democracy. If we are completely free, we will soon be unequal; if we are completely equal, we are

not free. That balance is so important to us that we should worry when it threatens to go awry.

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making a neighborhood or a society a wholesome place to live, and to provide improved life chances to those who live there, is citizen involvement – a vibrant "civil society." [define]

This recognition of the importance of the village in the raising of the child would be unalloyed good news if it were not also true that in the United States almost every measure of civic involvement has been trending down for over two decades and is still in decline (voter participation, PTA membership, church attendance, cub scouts, visiting a neighbor, etc.). In an article entitled "Bowling Alone" in the current issue of the Journal of Democracy, Putnam makes a metaphor out of the curious fact that participation in bowling leagues is down while individual bowling is up. This represents a pervasive and more serious phenomenon: contemporary Americans have fled from the public square.

We are living with a crisis of disaffiliation. We sit passive and isolated in front of our television sets, or at our computer

terminals, or in our "edge cities" and suburbs, or otherwise in the pursuit of private and individual satisfactions. Our flight is both physical and psychological. Given the strong cross-national positive correlation between associational membership and "social trust," no wonder we are experiencing so much cynicism and distrust!

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movements on behalf of groups previously excluded from full participation in American life. These thrusts on behalf of social justice (i.e. equality) certainly ought to be seen as another proud step toward fulfilling the promises implied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, a step toward a closer approximation of the universal values in those great founding documents, but they also were occasioned by a great deal of social turmoil. The anti-war movement that was such a defining element of the decade was incredibly confrontational, leaving rips in the social fabric that have not yet fully healed.

Furthermore, the counterculture that we sometimes think of primarily in terms of styles and taste in music and dress was more seriously a frontal assault on the verities of the middle class; epater le bourgeoisie was raised to the level of ideological principle. As middle-class culture is marked by such customary beliefs and expectations as planning for the future, doing one's duty, postponing gratification, exhibiting deference to established

authority, trusting the institutions of American life, and respecting one's elders; the counterculture urged us to live spontaneously and creatively without being imprisoned by the stultifying conformity of middle class life, not to trust anyone over thirty, to question authority, to recognize that human relationships are fleeting and therefore self-actualization is the most important thing, and otherwise to live for the moment. Whether you code it positive or negative, it was an entirely different orientation to the world. Even though it did not gain the adherence of anything close to a majority of the population, it did influence attitudes and values profoundly.

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the cooperation we need so much? How can we bring things together as we must without losing sight of plurality?"

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"Democracy begins in conversation," wrote John Dewey. It can not exist without a certain level of mutual trust, without citizens caring enough about the success of the whole to forego on occasion the rewards of atomistic competition. 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 that we belong to the whole, that our personal fate is bound up in the fate 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

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and it was about the sanctity of the Union, because with the Union rested the world's hope for democracy.

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and for people like themselves but for others who are different, that 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 documents.

The sanctity of the individual and the promise of individual rights contained in the Constitution are central to any understanding of the meaning of America, but I believe individualism by itself, the currently fashionable radical form of liberty, resting only on the entitlement of individuals to protection from the government and from other individuals, is an impoverished notion of America. We are not unidimensional creatures. We are not profit-maximizing animals. We can not live meaningful lives unencumbered by obligations to others

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Remarks by Sheldon Hackney
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities
to the Commonwealth Club of California
San Francisco, California, April 21, 1995

Lasting Values in a Disposable World

Imagine a nation that can make room on its airwaves for "Beavis and Butthead" but not for Ken Burns' documentaries on the Civil War and baseball; that can make room on its bookshelves for Howard Stern's Private Parts but not for the writings of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, or Mark Twain; that can make room in its public spaces for video games but not for exhibits about Thomas Jefferson or the history of American industry; that can bring millions of people together in small groups to talk therapeutically about their feelings but not to talk about the ideas that shape their lives. Is that the country of our dreams?

Will we be building the society in which we want to live if we let the rare books and manuscripts in our libraries and archives disintegrate, if we allow the objects in our historical sites and museums to rust and decay, if we do not keep alive in our collective memory the story of our nation? Are we fulfilling the promise of America if we simply leave it to the economic market to decide who will be able to lift their lives to a higher plane through encounters with the accumulated wisdom and beauty of civilization? Will we be happy in a society that makes no distinction between things of lasting value and things that are disposable?

I am sure the answer to these questions is a resounding "NO," but the thoughtless people who glibly assert that the country can do without the National Endowment for the Humanities are saying "yes." They are choosing an America of cultural decay and spiritual impoverishment.

We all know how trendy it is to bash the federal government, so what I am about to do -- explain why the NEH is good for America -- will be unfashionable! So be it. We need the NEH, among other reasons, because we need more sound reasoning and fewer sound bites, more bold ideas and fewer bold headlines, more informed discussion and less uninformed pandering.

The NEH is a necessity, not a luxury. It is a necessity because democracy, citizenship, and the humanities are intimately and inextricably connected. As Charles Frankel put it, "[We] are the citizens of a free society. [We] must make [our] own decisions about the good, the true, and the beautiful But [our] individual schemes of value and structures of belief within which [we] make our choices, are largely formed by the social and cultural atmosphere, with all its educational and miseducational effects." The humanities, as promoted by the NEH, can create and preserve the sort of social and cultural atmosphere in which democratic citizenship can flourish. The humanities transform us from historical objects into historical actors, from inhabitants into citizens.

"Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." That is how Congress summed up the mission of the NEH in 1965. Thirty years later, the Endowment works better than ever to fulfill its mission. It helps in the unglamorous but critical task of preserving the cultural heritage of the nation. It works to ensure that our cultural heritage is shared by all our citizens and not just those wealthy enough to afford it. It guarantees that America will be a leader in developing new knowledge to foster "wisdom and vision" in the future. These are the three basic but crucial functions of the NEH -- crucial to the survival and progress of our democratic society -- and they are functions that the private sector alone cannot perform.

Preserving and extending our cultural heritage is especially critical today when so many Americans worry about the fragmentation of our pluralistic society and feel that our bonds of cohesion are dangerously weak. The humanities offer an antidote to atomization and isolation by connecting us to our past, to our future, and to each other. Only through an awareness of our cultural heritage can we see ourselves as members of a democratic community, as part of a fabric that stretches backwards and forwards across time and spreads in a complex weave across space. The sociologist Robert Bellah reminds us that we are "only able to understand ourselves and our future in constant conversation with our past. Memory and hope belong together."

Memory and hope are linked in the NEH programs that will preserve through microfilming three million brittle books that are decaying in the nation's libraries, or the newspaper collections that are similarly disappearing due to age, or the physical objects at historical sites, museums, or archives. The NEH also provides the crucial financial support for the editing and publication of the papers of such historical figures as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Dwight Eisenhower, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others.

The NEH is also linking memory and hope when it funds curriculum development projects and educational demonstration projects. Every summer, the NEH funds institutes and seminars for 2,000 school teachers and 1,000 college teachers; every year about 500,000 students are taught by teachers who have participated in an NEH seminar or institute in the previous summer. The summer seminars invariably refresh, and frequently transform, the participants. They go back to their classrooms not only with new material to teach but with renewed enthusiasm for their calling, a calling that is critical to the future of the nation. These seminars would not continue without the NEH.

The headline grabbers who want to get rid of the NEH say that it is a matter of equity. If we are going to cut programs for the poor and vulnerable, it is only fair that we cut what the sloganeers characterize as a "sandbox for the rich." In this cartoon, the NEH is portrayed as "welfare for the wealthy," an entitlement for the elite. The question is, who are the real elitists? Isn't it insultingly elitist to assume that ordinary Americans are not interested in the humanities? Isn't it the ultimate arrogance to believe that "culture" should be the private property of those who can pay for it?

The NEH is, in fact, our best guarantee that our cultural heritage will be available to all Americans regardless of how much money they make or where they live. Every summer, several hundred thousand Americans flock to the Chautauqua tents on the Great Plains to be engaged there by scholar/actors portraying historical figures. Throughout the year, in libraries and senior citizen centers in small-town and rural America, men and women gather to discuss books that open up new worlds of experience and shed fresh light on everyday existence. Close to two million people, for instance, saw "Seeds of Change," an exhibit marking the Columbian Quincentenary, as it visited libraries in fifty-eight cities and towns.

My highest priority as Chairman of the NEH is to bring more Americans into the humanities. Without the NEH, millions of Americans who are not in college or school, who live in areas that do not abound in cultural institutions, or who do not have enough money to provide for themselves the life-enriching experiences that the NEH makes possible -- in other words, millions of ordinary Americans -- would be denied participation in the sorts of programs that reveal the meaning in our lives, that give us access to our cultural heritage, that help connect us to our communities and to the nation, that link our collective memories to our personal lives and to our hopes for the future.

The NEH is about democracy -- about equal access and participation by the many, not the few. Eleven million people annually participate in programs sponsored by the state councils on the humanities; millions more visit NEH-funded library and museum exhibits; and the cumulative audience annually for the radio and television documentaries made possible by grants from the NEH is an estimated 244 million people. This isn't a sandbox; it is more like a broad beach -- and a public one at that.

Democratizing the humanities doesn't just mean spreading already existing knowledge. It also means expanding our cultural heritage by supporting the creation of new knowledge. By sponsoring basic research in the humanities, we provide the tools that will help future generations of American citizens cultivate wisdom and vision of their own.

Let me give you an example. In 1979, Professor Laurel Ulrich, then of the University of New Hampshire, was on an NEH summer grant when she discovered in the Maine State Archives an 18th-century diary of a midwife named Martha Ballard. In 1985, she received an NEH Fellowship for University Teachers to research and write A Midwife's Tale, a book that uses Ballard's diary to invite us into the daily life of a rural New England community and to explore the roles women played in it. The book won almost every important award for which it was eligible, including the Pulitzer Prize. Only 6% of NEH grant funds go to individuals, but the long-term intellectual return on that small investment is incalculable.

Currently, with seed money from the Public Programs Division of the NEH, A Midwife's Tale is being made into a film intended for television and for classroom use, so her brilliant work will reach an even wider audience. With more memory comes more hope.

Well, one might ask, if the humanities are so wonderful, why won't people pay for

them? Why is a government subsidy needed? There are a couple of parts to the answer to this fundamental question. The first is that for most of the activities supported by the NEH, the individual beneficiaries are so indirect and distant from the activity itself that it would be impossible to devise a "user's fee." The beneficiaries of fellowships given to scholars are the future readers of the articles and books they produce, and the students of the teachers whose understanding of the subject is enriched by that new scholarship. The beneficiaries of our preservation projects, and editions of the papers of American presidents, and translations, and reference books are the future readers who would not otherwise have access to those materials. The beneficiaries of our summer seminars for college and school teachers, and curriculum development projects are future students. In each case the real individual beneficiary is difficult to identify, but the social benefit is clear and compelling.

In some cases, of course, the consumer is immediate and recognizable: the audience for the Chautauqua or the television documentary; the participant in the reading and discussion program in the local library or museum. Here, those whose lives are enriched by the experience of the humanities can be identified. If the NEH did not exist, would commercial sponsors step forward to fund programs for these consumers of culture? Non-profit documentary film makers have testified repeatedly that they can not attract sufficient funds from for-profit businesses for the sort of programs, grounded in sound scholarship, that the NEH funds. There are many cheaper ways for corporations to get their messages to a mass audience.

If the NEH did not exist, would the market be satisfied by entrepreneurs who would sell tickets or use pay-per-view? Yes, perhaps in part this would happen for some public programs. The problem is that those who could not afford the price would not get the benefit. The humanities would become once again reserved for the elite. Is that so bad, a tough-minded realist might ask? We certainly allow that to happen not only with furs and yachts and all sorts of luxury items, but we also allow the quality of the necessities of life, like housing and food, to vary according to one's ability to pay.

The answer is that food and shelter are one thing; the kind of understanding and meaning that one gets from the humanities is on a different plane of significance, and it would be cruel indeed to let it be rationed entirely by the market. Furthermore, and much more significant, is the fact that there is an overwhelmingly important benefit to a democratic society from having a citizenry enlightened by the humanities. The social benefit derived from the humanities, just as from formal education, is too important to risk leaving even the poorest out. It must, therefore, be funded by society as a whole.

Why, however, do we need a National Endowment to secure our democratic future? Why not leave it up to the states and local governments? In reality, the NEH is already a very successful example of a federal-state and public-private partnership. Listen to the language of the law that created the NEH: "The encouragement and support of national progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, are also appropriate matters of concern to the Federal Government." That is how things still are. NEH's job is to work in partnership with local communities and the private sector. It neither dictates nor monopolizes. It assists, encourages, and

catalyzes. It is democratic in its means as well as its ends.

We need a National Endowment because without it there would be nobody to encourage humanities activities of truly national significance. No state would have an incentive to fund large projects of national scope; ambitious television documentaries, traveling museum exhibitions, or major editorial and publishing ventures involving the papers or writings of important national figures. Without a national program of summer seminars, humanities teachers would probably be limited to in-service training experiences in their own locales, thereby missing the opportunity of studying with especially outstanding scholars who happen to teach in a university in another state, and missing the stimulation of working with teachers from other states who would bring very different experiences to the seminar.

Most important, without the national merit-review process, drawing upon the most talented panelists from across the country and pitting every proposal against the best proposals from all over the nation, the humanities would not have the impulse towards excellence that national competition provides. Corporations, foundations, and philanthropists, who now frequently depend on NEH judgments about quality in awarding their own financial support, would not have the benefit of that guidance. An NEH grant is an imprimatur of excellence that benefits our society in general. With this hallmark of quality -- this sign that the project has passed through the Endowment's rigorous merit review process (250 panels per year employ about 1200 scholars, professionals and laypeople) -- it becomes much easier to attract additional funding.

In other words, we need a National Endowment to provide the venture capital for the humanities, which then stimulates private funding. The federal dollar doesn't drive out private money, it brings it in. The federal dollar is the leveraging factor; if it disappeared, the incentives for private funding that come from NEH validation would also disappear. Each year, NEH's \$150 mm in grants leverages more than \$200 mm in non-federal dollars in cost sharing and matching.

Ideologues may say either the federal government or the private sector. Here, however, public and private work together, in partnership, true to the letter and spirit of the law that created the NEH. The danger is that getting rid of the NEH, far from boosting private support, will actually reduce that support and have a devastating effect on the essential role the humanities play in American democracy.

The Endowment provided the investment that launched the Library of America series, which has now published authoritative editions of the collected works of thirty-six major American authors, including Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, W.E.B. DuBois, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Richard Wright. The nonprofit publisher also raises money to subsidize the purchase of these volumes by schools and small-town libraries. Newsweek called this the most important book publishing project in the nation's history. It would never have started without the help of the NEH.

The Endowment also provided the investments that launched the career of Ken Burns and made possible the tremendous success of "The Civil War" and "Baseball." Under the recovery provision in our grants, Ken Burns returned to the NEH from the profits of "The Civil War" series the full amount that the NEH had contributed, and we were then able to reinvest those dollars in "Baseball", and the same recovery clause is in effect for it. If you watch the credits at the end of these films, you'll see how our venture capital has helped to attract other investors.

We should also note a little recognized benefit of the humanities in stimulating local economies through cultural tourism, in addition to the familiar rewards of improved quality of life. Just ask the people in Toledo, Ohio. An NEH-sponsored exhibit called "The Age of Rubens" came to the Toledo Museum of Art after setting attendance records in Boston. In Toledo, approximately 226,000 visitors of all ages, incomes, and levels of education saw the exhibit -- this in a city of only 337,000 people! Clearly, the whole geographic region was benefitting; well over half the visitors were from out of town. Not only did they spend money at the Museum, they also shopped, ate out, visited other local attractions, and stayed in hotels. All told, they poured \$7.6 million into the local economy. By the time this money was re-spent by businesses and individuals, the economic impact of "The Age of Rubens" in Toledo reached \$23 million. We don't usually think about the economic multiplier effect of a seventeenth-century Flemish painter, but cultural tourism is a vital and growing industry, and the NEH is providing some of its R&D.

There simply can be no doubt that without the NEH both the quantity and the quality of programs in the humanities would suffer irreparable damage. It is remarkable -- astonishing, really -- that the NEH has such a huge impact with such a small budget. Its Congressional appropriation in the current year is \$177mm, only one percent of all research dollars in the federal budget, only 1/100 of one percent, of the federal budget, roughly 70 cents per American per year, not quite the cost of a small diet soda at McDonald's. The NEH is the best buy for the American people since the Louisiana Purchase.

Even though the NEH budget is tiny in the context of the federal budget, the NEH is still the largest single humanities grant-maker in the nation. Every year, almost two-thirds of all grants to humanities projects throughout the nation come from the NEH and the state humanities councils!

Finally, we need a National Endowment because the strength and prestige of the United States requires cultural as well as economic and military leadership. It is increasingly recognized among national security and foreign affairs professionals that government support for cultural activities advances American interests by demonstrating that not only our products but also our ideas and values deserve admiration and even emulation. In today's world, we must be strong culturally as well as militarily and economically.

Every major industrial nation gives government support to the humanities, most of them much more generously than the United States. We do it our own way -- democratically. We do not dictate from Washington. Instead, we respond to initiatives from the public. We do not replace private and local sponsorship with government funding. Instead, we use

government funding to stimulate private and local support for projects of the highest quality.

We have good reason to fear a government that tells us what to think; we have equally good reason to fear a government that doesn't understand the connection between thinking and democracy, between the cultivation of memory and our hope for the future.

Milan Kundera, speaking from his memory as a Czech whose nation was targeted for extinction first by the Nazis and then by the Soviets, reminds us that, "When a big power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness, it uses the method of organizing forgetting. And, a nation which loses awareness of its past, gradually loses itself."

If we want our future to be unlimited, our past must be unlimited as well. It must be made available for exploration, opened up to voyagers in search of meaning -- not just our national past, but the whole terrain of human experience and thought where one will find ideas and stories of permanent significance.

The disposable world in which we live -- the world of instant coffee and instant gratification, of artificial sweeteners and virtual reality -- militates against things of lasting value. The humanities, on the other hand, link us to realms of lasting value. They connect us to our memories, unveil the future in all its possibilities, and equip us to choose democratically who we want to be, as individuals and as a nation. The nation needs the NEH.

End.

Remarks of Sheldon Hackney
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities
At the Annual Meeting of
The American Educational Research Association
San Francisco, California
April 21, 1995

By now we can all recite the litany of America's social ills: rampant crime, the dissolution of the family, too many children having babies, homelessness, stagnant incomes, the increasing disparity of wealth, more than twenty per cent of our children being raised in poverty, decaying urban centers, a persistent stratum of citizens ill equipped for employment in the new global economy, the AIDS epidemic, a crumbling physical infrastructure, and a national debt whose interest is consuming a huge proportion of annual tax revenues.

Whether as cause or effect, there is trouble in the spiritual realm as well. A recent Newsweek poll finds that three out of four Americans believe the United States is in moral and spiritual decline. A majority believe their children will live less well than typical Americans are now living, and most citizens believe the country is "on the wrong track." Just a year ago, the National Conference of Christians and Jews released the results of a survey of racial attitudes, asking a representative national sample a long list of questions about members of four broad groups: European Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans. The results were as disturbing as they were unsurprising. Distressingly high percentages of each group held negative stereotypes of the members of each of the other three

groups. There is abroad in the land a feeling of fragmentation, isolation and the loss of social cohesion.

Among many others, Jean Elshtain of the University of Chicago believes that American democracy is in trouble. "Democracy," she writes in Democracy on Trial, "requires laws, constitutions, and authoritative institutions, yes, but it also depends on what might be called democratic dispositions. These include preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward shared ends; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can't always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of one small group alone. But what do we see when we look around? We find deepening cynicism; the growth of corrosive forms of isolation, boredom, and despair; the weakening, in other words, of that world known as democratic civil society, a world of groups and associations and ties that bind."

This current worry is related, I believe, in a fundamental way to a central concern of American culture, the tension between the ideal of individualism and the reality of a highly organized society, which tension is exacerbated by our general human desire to be recognized as unique individuals and our desire to belong to something that is larger and somehow more significant than we are as individuals. From the very first, we have struggled with the challenge presented by the fact of ethnic diversity and the need

for national unity -- the problem of the many and the one. These delicate and oscillating balances are intimately bound up in our sense of being American.

Alan Wolfe of Boston University has also noted the tension between liberalism, understood as personal freedom from governmental or other external constraint, and democracy, understood as the will of the majority. This is also the tension between the many and the one. Wolfe writes, "The predicament of liberal democracy is that liberalism denies the logic of democracy and democracy denies the logic of liberalism, but neither can exist without the other." Too much liberty, one might observe, is anarchy and leads to the tyranny of the strong; too much democracy is authoritarianism and leads to the tyranny of the majority. The required balance between freedom and order rests on a mystical mutual dependence of the apparently opposing ideals of liberty and democracy. If we are completely free, we will soon be unequal; if we are completely equal, we are not free. That balance is so important to us that we should worry when it threatens to go awry.

Scholars interested in the problems of contemporary life and in economic development have begun to focus on what they are calling "social capital." They distinguish social capital from "human capital" (education, skills, training, traits of character, etc.) and from "physical capital" (natural resources, roads, bridges, communications linkages, means of production, etc.).

Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard University, did a study of regional governments in Italy to try to identify why some were successful and others were less so. The variations in success were not strongly correlated with any of the usual variables of human or physical capital (education, wealth, resources, etc.) Success was statistically best explained, however, by measures of citizen engagement. Furthermore, the social networks of civic involvement seemed to precede rather than to follow the success. This implies that the most important thing in making a neighborhood or a society a wholesome place to live, and to provide improved life chances to those who live there, is citizen involvement -- a vibrant "civil society." [define]

This recognition of the importance of the village in the raising of the child would be unalloyed good news if it were not also true that in the United States almost every measure of civic involvement has been trending down for over two decades and is still in decline (voter participation, PTA membership, church attendance, cub scouts, visiting a neighbor, etc.). In an article entitled "Bowling Alone" in the current issue of the Journal of Democracy, Putnam makes a metaphor out of the curious fact that participation in bowling leagues is down while individual bowling is up. This represents a pervasive and more serious phenomenon: contemporary Americans have fled from the public square.

We are living with a crisis of disaffiliation. We sit passive

and isolated in front of our television sets, or at our computer terminals, or in our "edge cities" and suburbs, or otherwise in the pursuit of private and individual satisfactions. Our flight is both physical and psychological. Given the strong cross-national positive correlation between associational membership and "social trust," no wonder we are experiencing so much cynicism and distrust!

The downward trend in measures of civic involvement over the past twenty-five years is mirrored in a Harris poll that has been taken continuously since 1966 and that shows a plummeting level of confidence expressed by the public in the presidency, the Congress, the news media, and in every institution in American life.

Just before the election, the New York Times ran a cover story entitled "Antipolitics" in which the editors describe the public as being in a "sullen, surly mood." That mood is suggested in a series of stories, from which the reader could infer that the cause of the nasty public mood is to be found in such factors as stagnant living standards, rising crime, the proliferation of sources of news and thus the bombarding of the public with an overabundance of information (most of it negative), the dramatic rise in spending of special interest groups, gridlock in Washington, and impossibly high expectations of any President of the United States.

Those factors are undoubtedly real, but they are not

sufficient to explain the long-term decline in American confidence as measured by the Harris poll (or a similar Gallup poll, for that matter). This is not the place to develop a complete explanation for what has been happening in America over the past three decades or more, but I believe any adequate explanation of our current condition would have to begin with a recognition of the 1960s as a watershed in American history, a significant reordering of attitudes and relationships that have not yet been reintegrated into any sort of coherent notion of what the society is and where it is going.

The sixties were years during which "equality" and "liberty" were shouting at once and seemed to be saying the same thing. America took giant strides forward in social justice and inclusiveness, and countless subtle and no-so-subtle barriers to individual fulfillment were torn down. On the other hand, the sixties had a dark side as well: the prevalence of self-indulgence, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, disrespect for authority, anti-intellectualism and delusions of revolutionary transformation. More important, even the positive changes had unintended consequences and perhaps unavoidable costs. The divisiveness inherent in that kind of rapid social change left a residue that corrodes the bonds of social cohesion. All the social justice movements of the post-war era began in the decade of the sixties broadly defined, beginning with the civil rights movement ignited by the Brown decision in 1954, but including the women's movement,

the gay and lesbian rights movement, the disabilities movement, the American Indian movement, La Raza, and other movements on behalf of groups previously excluded from full participation in American life. These thrusts on behalf of social justice (i.e. equality) certainly ought to be seen as another proud step toward fulfilling the promises implied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, a step toward a closer approximation of the universal values in those great founding documents, but they also were occasioned by a great deal of social turmoil. The anti-war movement that was such a defining element of the decade was incredibly confrontational, leaving rips in the social fabric that have not yet fully healed.

Furthermore, the counterculture that we sometimes think of primarily in terms of styles and taste in music and dress was more seriously a frontal assault on the verities of the middle class; epater le bourgeois was raised to the level of ideological principle. As middle-class culture is marked by such customary beliefs and expectations as planning for the future, doing one's duty, postponing gratification, exhibiting deference to established authority, trusting the institutions of American life, and respecting one's elders; the counterculture urged us to live spontaneously and creatively without being imprisoned by the stultifying conformity of middle class life, not to trust anyone over thirty, to question authority, to recognize that human relationships are fleeting and therefore self-actualization is the

most important thing, and otherwise to live for the moment. Whether you code it positive or negative, it was an entirely different orientation to the world. Even though it did not gain the adherence of anything close to a majority of the population, it did influence attitudes and values profoundly.

Then, in 1973-74, in a brief span of months, three events occurred that shook the confidence that America has traditionally had in itself. Watergate, the Arab oil embargo, and the full awareness that we would leave Vietnam without a victory. America's innocence, its traditional optimism, and its belief that all problems have solutions were fundamentally shaken.

Through the seventies and eighties, not only did the social justice movements continue to practice and profit from the politics of difference, but the individualism of rights-based liberalism competed with the individualism of material greed. Christopher Lasch called it the "culture of narcissism," and Tom Wolfe dubbed the eighties the "me decade." Missing from the public discussion, Os Guinness laments, was a "common vision for the common good."

Sixty years ago John Dewey wrote eloquently about our problem in his book, A Common Faith: "What Philosophers have got to do is to work out a fresh analysis of the relations between the one and the many. Our shrinking world presents that issue today in a thousand different forms. . . . How are we going to make the most of the new value we set on variety, difference, and individuality -

- how are we going to realize their possibilities in every field, and at the same time not sacrifice that plurality to the cooperation we need so much? How can we bring things together as we must without losing sight of plurality?"

Today, freed perhaps by the end of the Cold War and the artificial cohesion provided by the presence of an external enemy, as we draw apart from each other in our private and self-indulgent pursuits, we grow suspicious of each other, and we become less capable of common action. It is a worry.

"Democracy begins in conversation," wrote John Dewey. It can not exist without a certain level of mutual trust, without citizens caring enough about the success of the whole to forego on occasion the rewards of atomistic competition. 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 that we belong to the whole, that our personal fate is bound up in the fate 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 it was about 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 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. To that end, the National Endowment for the Humanities is sponsoring a "national conversation on American pluralism and identity," on what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century, on what principles and common commitments hold Americans together and make it possible for our ethnically and racially and culturally diverse society to be successful as a democracy. Where along the continuum from melting pot to mosaic are we to find the appropriate image to describe an American identity suitable for the twenty-first century?

Through a program of grants, a film intended for television and use in the nation's classrooms, an interactive bulletin board on the internet, a conversation kit that will be made available to anyone or any group that wishes to conduct its version of the conversation, the NEH seeks to bring together unprecedented numbers of Americans to talk and to listen to each other about shared values and the meaning of America (telephone 1-800-NEH-1121 for information). It is a conversation in which all voices need to be heard and all points of view represented. Only in that way can we revitalize our sense of our communal 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 conversation and what we learn from each other as we talk.

However large the task, I believe we must reconstruct networks of mutual engagement of the kind that will serve as "social capital." We must revive public-mindedness. We must rediscover the truth that individualism is a group activity. We must create a public sphere in which Americans can discuss matters of mutual concern with each other. Without a sense of common belonging, we are doomed to narcissistic failure. Our first step out of the moral nihilism of our public and our private lives is to define our common commitments and shared principles, and to find in our common identity a moral purpose that is worthy of our loyalty.

You may draw your own conclusions from our conversation. My own belief is that there is continuing power in the idea of America that moved Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., that has moved generations of our people to sacrifice in order to build a better life not just for themselves and for people like themselves but for others who are different, that 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 documents.

The sanctity of the individual and the promise of individual rights contained in the Constitution are central to any understanding of the meaning of America, but I believe individualism by itself, the currently fashionable radical form of liberty, resting only on the entitlement of individuals to protection from the government and from other individuals, is an

impoverished notion of America. We are not unidimensional creatures. We are not profit-maximizing animals. We can not live meaningful lives unencumbered by obligations to others

I believe, further, that there is an inclusive historical narrative in which we all recognize not only the stories of our kith and kin but in which we recognize that we all are playing roles in a common story, in which we are all linked to each other across barriers of time and boundaries of race, in which we share the shame of our mistakes and the glory of our achievements, in which the meaning of America is to be found in the common ground of its aspirations of liberty and justice for all.

Comments of Sheldon Hackney
Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
September 30, 1995

I bring you a report from Washington where I am close enough to the culture wars to have been wounded by the flying shrapnel. What I see distresses me, of course, but I want to focus on one particular aspect of the political mindset in our nation's capitol that has broad consequences. Everyone seems to agree that the American Dream, the mythic focus of America's hope for the future, is dead, or at least that it should be listed in critical condition. The disagreements have to do with who killed it or how to resuscitate it.

Voices on the right blame government itself. One can find this point of view most intelligently set forth in a Hudson Institute book edited by Lamar Alexander and Chester Finn entitled The New Promise of American Life, a conscious play on the Herbert Croly classic of 1909. According to the Hudson authors, The Promise of American Life laid out the fatally flawed plan for replacing a civil society based on local communities and volunteer organizations with a national consciousness and commitment to social justice to be achieved through an active national government. The task of current conservatism, therefore, is simply to undo the mistakes of progressive liberalism by disassembling big government.

Whether or not this is an adequate reading of twentieth century American history, the conspiratorial charge that

government bureaucrats are arrogant and that government itself is the largest threat to personal freedom seems find some confirmation in Waco and Ruby Ridge. It is one of many ironies in the contemporary political scene that the marching song of the Far Right sounds suspiciously like the charges against the FBI and other federal law enforcement agencies shouted from the barricades by the Far Left ^{not} ~~for~~ so many years.

For the less conspiratorial, there is radical individualism's assumption that if everyone would simply behave properly, then all our problems as a society would disappear. There was an old liberal orthodoxy that maintained that there is no common interest apart from the sum of all our individual self-interests. This is now conservative orthodoxy (witness the writers in the Hudson Institute's volume, The New Promise of American Life). It is as if the scruffy, hirsute, cavorting young anarchists and hedonists at Woodstock have been bathed, coiffed, dressed by Brooks Brothers and Ann Taylor, and marched forth as the squeaky-clean libertarian Right.

The reason that there is so little and so ineffective counterargument in the public arena these days is that liberals basically agree with much of the conservative diagnosis. Current government programs do not seem to be dealing effectively with crime, drugs, broken homes, high divorce rates, children having children, homelessness, neighborhoods held in thrall by violence, stagnant personal income, the great and growing disparity of wealth, an increasing sense that the society is fraying and fragmenting, and that Americans are retreating from the public

square, from an engagement with their fellow citizens in the pursuit of the common enterprise.

While liberalism remains to be redefined in a way that fits the current realities of life, I am here concerned with something more fundamental, a potentially disastrous error that is being made by both Left and Right: the assumption that the American Dream is only about economic opportunity and that it is only for the individual. For the last two decades we have witnessed the rights-based individualism of the Left pitted against the greed-based individualism of the Right. What gets crushed between them is the "common vision of the common good" which I think is desperately needed at this time.

American culture revolves around several axes, but one of the most important is defined by the poles of individualism and organization, the creative tension that Alexis de Tocqueville noted in the 1830s between proud self-reliance and the urge to create and join organizations for every purpose that comes along. John Wayne, the icon of lonely heroism, and Alfred Sloan the founding genius of General Motors, struggle for the soul of America. That struggle merely continues the seventeenth century argument between Roger Williams and John Cotton.

I have always thought it to be the greatest irony that the fierce love affair of the American imagination with individualism, from Natty Bumppo to Clint Eastwood, obscured the reality that our national genius is really for large scale organization: building the transcontinental railroads, running the telegraph and electricity lines, building industrial giants

such as GM and IBM, going to the moon, winning World War II and the Gulf War, and similar feats of large-scale organizing to apply technology to a common purpose.

This is not simply a matter of myth versus reality, for there is reality in both our admiration for individualism and our need for community. The winning of the West looms large in our collective memory, but wagon trains and barn raisings (not to mention the U.S. Army) were a greater part of the Western experience than Mountain Men or prospecting for gold. We worship exceptional individual achievement so much that we have organized an Olympic training program to "produce" American athletes who can compete internationally.

One of the projects of National Endowment for the Humanities of which I am most proud is a "national conversation on American pluralism and identity," which brings together diverse groups of Americans, using common texts, to talk and listen to each other about what it means to be American, about what common commitments we must share if we are to be successful as a society in a world torn asunder by tribalism, about the unum in "E Pluribus Unum."

We need to know what kind of country we want to be before we can resolve such contentious questions as immigration policy, affirmative action, drawing Congressional district lines in a race-conscious way to guarantee representation to a particular racial or ethnic group, or creating special public school districts in order to serve ethnic or religious groups that want their children educated in a culturally particular environment, teaching values in schools, bilingual education, indeed, the

question of public education itself, or the problems of the inner cities that we tend to see as the problems of "others". If we can agree about who we want to be, we are more likely to be able to come to some agreement about how to solve our common problems in ways that will incrementally get us where we want to go.

I went around the country for about a year while we were planning our special grant program for the "national conversation" talking about it and listening to the points of view of other people. In order to test whether the conversation "worked", and to learn as much about its likely dynamics as I could, I conducted six trial conversations in communities very different from each other in ethnic mix, economic base, and geography. Those were exhilarating because at the end of each one, the group spontaneously would ask how they might meet again to continue the conversation.

(HOUSTON) = *Vietnamese-American teaching ESL to chicanos*

One of my conversations was in Oklahoma City, now a powerful national symbol of the loosening bonds of civic trust. The group of Oklahomans who gathered to talk to each other consisted of people who had not known each other before that evening and it was diverse. It contained Euro-Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, African Americans and Hispanic Americans, and it spent more than the usual amount of time recognizing grievances, and talking about differences, before grappling seriously with commonalities. These centered heavily, as usually was the case, on equal economic opportunity and on widely shared political values and the crucial fact that we agree on how to settle our

disagreements. This, of course, confirms the widely held view that the political ideals of the Revolution are the essence of the national identity.

That essence, however, contains a powerful contradiction because the ideals of the Revolution are both Liberty and Equality. That is the problematic of American politics. Liberty implies a high tolerance for inequality. That is why equality is usually defined as political equality and equality of economic opportunity. Thus the debate of American politics has usually been about whether or not certain classes or groups actually have equal economic opportunity, and whether "special economic interests" are corrupting the political process. ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY JUSTIFIES INEQUALITY, BUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY ERRODES POLITICAL EQUALITY.

Well, back in Oklahoma City, toward the end of the discussion, after much talk about the centrality of economic opportunity in the American identity, a college teacher got the floor. He had been born and raised in China and had come to the United States to get his PhD. Like a lot of his compatriots in that first wave of Chinese students, he decided to stay. For a long time, he told us, he thought that for him the appeal of the United States was the higher standard of living, the material comforts it afforded. Then, he told us, he began to realize that what he valued most in his new American identity was freedom. "Here," he said, "no one tells me where I must live, what job I must hold, how many children I can have, what I can read and see, what I must believe, what I can say."

We must not ignore the non-material parts of the American Dream. America is not just about the chance for individuals to get rich, as vivid a part of our image as that is. It is about a dream of justice and human community. It is about a society that not only tolerates, but that encourages, individuals in their quest for full realization -- vocationally, intellectually, and spiritually. It is about a society of immigrants whose ideal is inclusion in the larger society.

Imagine yourself an African American who has worked extremely hard against great odds to achieve the American Dream and who has managed enough economic success to provide a comfortable middle class standard of living for one's family. That should be very satisfying. One might even feel, "I've come a long way, baby." Yet, there is a sour note. As Jennifer Hocschild writes in her book, Facing Up To The American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of America, as part of the explanation of middle class black rage and the fact that working class blacks believe much more in the American Dream than middle class blacks, "They've (middle class blacks) achieved success in a narrow sense, but not in the wider sense of individual satisfaction and appreciation by the rest of society." "The American Dream," she concludes, "is about dignity, respect, connectedness, and belonging."

For all of its supposed intolerance of difference, Tocqueville's "tyranny of the majority", America's drive for conformity as an antidote to the chaos of cultural diversity and the lack of an ethnic or racial or religious national identity,

America has been the most hospitable society on the face of the globe to utopian experiments in communal living. From John Winthrop's Puritan "City on a Hill" to the Branch Davidians, from the Henry George Single Taxers of the late nineteenth century to the Summer of Love in 1967 in San Francisco, from Brook Farm in the 1840s to The Farm (the late 1960s countercultural collective in Tennessee), from the Old Order Amish who resist all innovation to the Mormons who adapt to modernity quite nicely, thank you, some Americans always seem to be trying to perfect community.

Robert Bellah and colleagues in Habits of the Heart observes that Americans hold their values as "preferences" and not as outgrowths of cultural identity. They believe that the only real social bonds are those based on the "free choice of authentic selves." I am not sure I believe that, but one can see it played out in fictional form in the current low-budget film rage, The Brothers McMullen, in which three brothers struggle to "come of age", grow out of a narcissistic existence of isolated self-indulgence, by choosing a commitment to others, in this case to the inevitable wise, tolerant, forgiving, women who seem because of genetic instinct to understand and to want commitment.

The tension between individualism and community is also a form of the religiously significant human desire to be recognized as a unique individual and at the same time to belong to something larger than the individual. The sentiment that I have always found most moving has been self-sacrifice. Perhaps this is rooted in my Christianity, whose central concept is self-

sacrifice, but I am moved to tears by almost all forms of self-sacrifice -- parents for their children, soldiers for their unit or for their cause, even the athlete who accepts an unglamorous role uncomplainingly because it will make the team better. Such self-sacrifice does not happen unless the individual has identified in a profound way with the larger purpose. The individual must feel that some essential part of his being is bound up in the larger group or higher purpose.

Society neither needs nor demands those dramatic acts of self-sacrifice frequently, but it does need daily acts of common commitment, of adjusting our individual behavior to recognize our obligation to others. The American Dream is too powerful and too important to be defined simply in material terms or in terms of isolated individuals. Human experience is social; human happiness must be a shared experience. The American Dream should imply a society whose common good is more than the sum of the individual self-interests of its citizens. It is about our mutual obligations and how none of us can be fulfilled unless all of us are included in the promise of American life.

Remarks of Sheldon Hackney
Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
At Tulane University
October 3, 1995

JEREMIAD FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

(It is great to be back and to see so many friends. Tulane holds a special place in our hearts because of the five intense years we spent here and because of all those friends and the help we got while here. I am going to enjoy particularly watching Eamon and Margaret at work, while Lucy and I luxuriate in the absence of responsibility. I often think that perhaps my most lasting contributions to Tulane is attracting Eamon Kelly from the Ford foundation. He is making a huge difference here at Tulane, but I am also very proud of the leadership role he is playing in the American Association of Universities and in higher education in general.)

The University looks prosperously different, yet totally familiar at the same time. No university is ever complete. They must grow and adapt to new challenges, yet there is a spirit or a personality that persists through those changes. Like any nostalgic old alumnus back for his fiftieth reunion, it is comforting to feel at home.)

(I couldn't be more happy in Washington. Despite the rigors of defending the NEH, I have no hospital, no football team, no faculty senate, no student newspaper. What could be better? I therefore do not miss being a college president at all. I do miss being on a campus, however. I miss the sense of community; I miss the intellectual stimulation; I miss the students.)

When I asked what I might talk about today, it was suggested that I might speak about my vision for higher education in the twenty-first century, the century for which Tulane is now preparing, if I judge correctly from the name of your ambitious fund-raising drive. Whenever I hear the word "vision", I reach for my twelve gauge. I realize everyone should have a vision and that someone lost a presidential election recently because of "the vision thing", but the word is being trivialized. Saul had a vision on the road to Damascus. John of Arc had a vision about leading the French nation against the English. Timothy Leary was the prophet of chemically induced visions. I try to save my visions for visionary moments. Instead, I want to talk to you in the great tradition of the American Jeremiad. As you are all involved in higher education, and since some of you will have quite a lot to say about higher education in the future, I thought I would give you a warning.

I begin with a paradox. Higher education is thriving, but it is also in trouble.

The first half of that paradoxical statement is undoubtedly

true. I hear myself saying frequently when arguing for adequate federal support for the National Endowment for the Humanities that American higher education is the envy of the world. It is.

(a) It not only earns us hard currency in foreign exchange from students coming here for their education,

(b) it provides what Joe Nye has called "soft power" for cultural diplomacy that supplements the respect that our economic power and military might earn abroad.

(c) Despite the price, and complaints about that price, record numbers of Americans are seeking college education.

(d) Furthermore, the financial yield on an investment in a college education over a lifetime is going up,

(e) the gap between the wages of a college graduate at age 30 and a high school graduate at age 30 is widening,

(f) Given the ominous presence of the global, high-tech economy in which we are competing, the perceived importance of a college education is very high and rising.

II. The second half of the paradoxical statement does not have a smiling face. Perhaps it is just my Puritan inclination to expect a Fall whenever Pride appears, but I believe we face huge challenges that go way beyond the task of operating with severe financial constraints.

If you wonder how bad things could happen when you are doing so well -- that is, if you wonder why voluntary accreditation has lost its credibility in Washington, why student aid programs have lost over 15% of their purchasing power over the last decade, why student aid programs are being cut in Washington even as I speak,

why local governments are trying to tax colleges -- I think I have the answer. Universities have not only dropped along with all other American institutions in the level of confidence the public expresses in them, but higher education has dropped more than any other institutional sector over the period 1966 to 1994 (61% - 25%).

The downside of the upside is that public scrutiny is increasing.

(a) That is why every academic scandal gets amplified in the press: the withdrawal of admission offers from students who had not fully revealed previous criminal activity; the withdrawal of a basketball scholarship from a high school star who had been convicted of rape; stories about the disadvantaged student who returned to the old neighborhood on holiday from Elite U. only to killed while involved in a holdup; misconduct in research; sexual harassment on campus, athletic cheating, etc.

(b) These scandals, however, are mere mosquito bites in the public relations jungle, and leopards are lurking. There is a much more serious threat. There has been a steady stream of high level criticism beginning with Allan Bloom's famous homage to an old man's dyspepsia, The Closing of the American Mind, and continuing through Roger Kimball's Tenured Radicals, Dinesh D'Souza's Illiberal Education, and now Lynn Cheney's Telling the Truth. The theme of these books is that intellectual anarchy reigns in higher education; there is no agreement about what an educated person should know.

College campuses have been captured by the intellectual left and the intellectual fads of deconstruction, postmodernism and poststructuralism.

(1) language is the way we know the world, and it is indeterminate, so texts have no fixed meanings.

(2) contra Plato, there is no world-in-itself that we can know, no absolute reality outside of history. Because we are prisoners of history, we are part of the reality we seek to know. thus, subject and object are one; they are implicated in each other, making it impossible to know which is which. We therefore live in a world of radical relativism.

(3) All knowledge is a mental construct, an interpretation conditioned by the context of the signified and the signifier. (Whew! I am loving this. Right here in the argument, however, I would say, "Yes, but some answers are better than others, and there are agreed upon ways of figuring out which is which. Knowledge may be contingent and in need of constant revision, but there are tests for truth that will guide that revision and must be respected!)

(4) Ah, that is just the point, say the critics, the radical left is in control and they have abolished all objective tests of truth and substituted political tests: does it advance the cause of currently fashionable victim groups?

(c) It may be that other voices are still shouting that college campuses are hegemonic enclaves of male Eurocentric

domination, but no one is listening to them anymore.

(d) Reading the critics, one would conclude that every college campus must be an ideological battleground where everyone's place in the lunch line at the cafeteria is determined by his ideological coloration, and everyone cowers in silence lest the thought police give them a ticket for violating P.C..

(e) The fact that you do not recognize your campus, nor anyone else's campus, should not make you complacent about this.

(f) Whom the Gods would destroy, they first render ridiculous by holding them up to the ideological fun-house mirrors. That is they distort. They seize upon some aberrant behavior, ridicule it, and then present it as the norm. This is assassination by anecdote. Repeated often enough, it is very difficult to counter.

(g) There is a predictable pattern to these attacks. The attackers use a carefully chosen vocabulary. For instance, they talk disparagingly of a "cultural elite", thus playing upon America's love-hate relationship with experts, not to mention anti-intellectualism. If their attack is basically political, they are sure to charge their target with being political. If their intent is to intimidate their enemies and thus to silence them, they portray themselves as defenders of free speech. If their purpose is to impose their own orthodoxy on the curriculum, they accuse higher education of suppressing their point of view.

(h) Please bear in mind that in these days of sound-bite journalism, the image IS everything. Because the still naive public assumes at some level of consciousness that where there is smoke there is fire, all your enemies have to do is to produce a lot of smoke. That is what they are doing.

(i) Beyond the orchestrated, ideologically motivated attacks, there is coming, I think, a problem caused by unfulfilled expectations. As the public comes to recognize the importance of primary and secondary education, its key role in almost any imagined scenario of redemption from our current social ills, and as they focus on the fact that primary and secondary education are in disastorous condition, they will begin to ask what higher education is doing to help. Whatever higher education is doing, I would predict, will not be enough.

III. What is to be Done? What is the Defense?

(a) admit mistakes and correct them immediately.

(b) Correct the record immediately. We are living in a new communications age in which everything has a second and third life whether or not one writes a rebuttal. Though I think it is a good thing to respond to criticism and to correct distortions, I do not think this sort of scapegoating can be effectively countered by direct responses.

(c) The only protection against this conscious campaign of demonization is for the public to be predisposed not to believe the worst. Therefore, knit yourself into the fabric of the community. It is hard to demonize a familiar and valued

part of the community.

In fact, whatever you can do to break down the barriers of suspicion between the campus and the community would be a good thing: college-school collaboratives, student voluntarism of all kinds, aggressive programs for nontraditional students and the general public, helping your locale solve its social and economic problems, etc. Tulane is doing a lot of imaginative and admirable things, I know, but when the spotlight hits, will it be enough?

IV. Remember, the ivory tower is an easy target for whatever political howitzer comes along. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that a good neighbor, living in a glass bungalow, could be hatching a malevolent conspiracy or doing anything that merits an artillery barrage.

Comments of Sheldon Hackney
Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities
At Annual Meeting of the
American Anthropological Association
Washington, D.C.
November 15, 1995

Speaking at the University of Texas on October 16, 1995 in the wake of the racially disparate reaction to the jury verdict in the O. J. Simpson murder trial, and on the same day as the Million Man March in Washington by black men for "atonement and reconciliation", President Clinton called upon Americans of all races "to clean our house of racism." "We must be one," he asserted, ". . . all of us, no matter how different, who share basic American values and are willing to live by them." Then, recalling the moments of crises from America's past, when the nation "had the courage to face the truth about our failure to live up to our own best ideals", the President said the country became stronger by becoming more inclusive. "At each of these moments, we looked in the national mirror and were brave enough to say, this is not who we are; we're better than that."

"This is not who we are." Well, who are we? That is the question, and it is a crucial question. Who we think we are influences what we do. The idea is tutor to the act. Archibald McLeish, in an essay published in 1949, 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."

Small wonder, then, that in recent months we have witnessed rancorous public disputes about the image of our past: the aborted Enola Gay exhibit, the cancelled American history theme park by Disney near Manassas, the proposed National History Standards, and perhaps the attempted abolition of the National Endowment for the Humanities itself. The question posed by those disputes is, "Who owns history?" Who controls our collective image of ourselves? Who is authorized to tell the country "what it has to do" by holding up the national mirror?

By now we can all recite the litany of domestic social ills threatening our sense of wellbeing; we are also feeling the anxieties of an illdefined "new world order" that have replaced the ironically comfortable certainties of the Cold War; we are painfully aware of the depredations the global market place is visiting upon the domestic economy; we have seen the polls indicating that most Americans think the country is "on the wrong track", that the younger generation will have a much more difficult time realizing "the American dream" than their parents, that the members of each racial group in distressingly high percentages hold negative stereotypes of the members of each of the other racial groups in the American population; and we have heard critics as diverse as Cornel West and William Bennett declare that America is in a spiritual crisis.

Furthermore, there is a long list of public policy issues whose resolutions will be driven by notions of the American identity: race conscious Congressional districting, affirmative action, immigration, bilingual education, Afro-centric curriculums, teaching values in schools, and perhaps such indirect matters as welfare policy, urban policy, and public education itself. It is time to look again into the national mirror.

The National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, a project of the National Endowment for the Humanities, does just that. It invites diverse groups of Americans to come together -- by teleconference, on the internet, through the radio, in face-to-face discussion groups -- to talk and to listen to each other about what holds us together as a country, about shared values in a heterogeneous society, about common commitments in a society that contains all the divisions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion that are the source of sectarian violence in almost every other quarter of the globe, about the unum in our national motto, E Pluribus Unum.

The National Conversation has been underway for only a few months, so the projects are still in their early stages.

(Endnote #1) On the other hand, the Conversation was two years in the making, and I have travelled all over the country talking about it, conducting trial conversations, seeking advice, and listening to Americans respond. There are already lessons that can be drawn from it. This, then, is an interim report.

The first thing to be said is that Americans are eager for the National Conversation. They may be a little puzzled at first if the subject is defined in its most abstract form, but the feeling of social fragmentation, of people drifting apart from one another, is very much on their minds, so they recognize the topic and understand its purpose. In addition to describing the project to dozens of audiences and seeking the advice of a score or more of interested groups, I conducted six "pilot conversations" in communities that differed in geography, ethnic composition and economic base. The groups were composed of diverse cross sections of their communities and of people who had not known each other previously. In each case, the groups spontaneously asked at the end of the evening if there was a way they could come back together to continue the discussion. This was a testament to the recognition of the importance of the topic, its protean nature, and also to the reality that it takes some time before participants begin to trust each other enough to express something of their deeper feelings, fears, and dreams.

(Endnote #2)

There are, of course, flash points and dead ends to worry about in these discussions, but the conversation has an integrity and a currency that draws people along with it across the tiger pits of discord and suspicion. (Endnote #3) Perhaps a few vignettes from some of the discussions I have lead will hint at the rewards and lessons of the conversation.

I went for my first "pilot conversation" to Garden City,

Kansas, a remote "meat factory" town in the middle of the prairie. There, physically tough, low wage jobs in the slaughter houses have attracted recent Hispanic and Asian immigrants, making the small town quite diverse. The group that gathered at the public library was as diverse as the town, but the conversation went smoothly. They talked of tolerance, the rewards of pluralism, the challenge of equal opportunity, and the ideal of democracy. There were very few points at which tensions could be observed. At the conclusion, after the discussants had all left, I asked the host if I had heard an honest discussion. "Yes," he said, "but at its most polite level." I had, he thought, heard what the group thought would make their community look good in the eyes of a visitor, especially a visitor from Washington. I was disappointed. Crushed might be a more accurate word. My long years of experience as a teacher had failed me.

On the way home on the plane, however, I began to think of the conversation in a slightly more positive way. This diverse group, after all, when it wanted to present itself in the best possible light, had reverted to a set of civic values that the town may not have lived by but which they recognized as shared ideals -- "our own best ideals," as the President said. True, they had not been able to talk candidly in front of a stranger about how they fell short of their ideal, but they held in common a notion of civic virtue that was inclusive and tolerant and based on equal access to justice and opportunity. I felt a

little better.

I travelled not long after that to Detroit and spent a wonderful evening talking about America with a group that was racially and ethnically very diverse, but was generally well educated and prosperous. The group was not shy, but it found itself agreeing in short order with a particularly articulate Euro-American who argued that the essence of Americanism was a reliance on the Constitution and the political system it defined, along with a commitment to equal individual opportunity, self-reliance and maximum individual freedom. When it became clear that a surprising agreement had been reached, one of the group looked around and said, "I wonder if the underclass would agree with us?" The ways in which opportunity is structured by class almost always came up in these discussions, along with other social justice issues.

In Boston, I found myself engaged with a group that was not designed to be a pilot conversation but nonetheless fell naturally into a feisty discussion of the American identity. After that discussion had been boiling along for a while, a young Latino activist was recognized, looked steadily around the big table and said in a voice full of challenge, "I am not an American. There is nothing about me that is American. I don't want to be American, and I have just as much right to be here as any of you." What an American thing to say - squarely in the great tradition of American dissent. He was affirming his American identity, even as he was denying it. I think he was

also launching a preemptive strike against the threat of exclusion by declaring that he did not want to be included, and he was announcing that his pre-American identity was very important to him and he did not want America to deprive him of it.

I was conversing in Oklahoma City long before it became a national symbol for both the cynicism that is corroding American democracy and for the kind of communal solidarity in the face of catastrophe that is the antidote to our alienation from what Jean Elshtain in Democracy on Trial calls "democratic dispositions", the habits of civic engagement and willingness to compromise that strengthen "civil society."

In Oklahoma City, after much talk of grievances held by various American groups, as well as about the ideals of equal opportunity and equal justice, a Chinese American man told his story. He had been born and raised in China and had been fortunate enough to have been sent by the government to the United States to get his PhD. Like a lot of his compatriots in that first wave of Chinese students, he defected. He stayed in America and now is a college teacher. For a long time, he told us, he thought that for him the appeal of the United States was the higher standard of living, the material comforts it afforded. Then, he told us, he began to realize that what he valued most in his new American identity was freedom. "Here," he said, "no one tells me where I must live, what job I can have, what I can read, what I must think, what I can say, how many children I can have.

Houston is an interesting city because it does not have a racial majority. It is about a third Anglo-American, a third African American, and a third Hispanic. The group that came together to discuss the meaning of being American represented those major communities plus the smaller Asian American portion of the population. At one point, after the group had been discussing family and how America viewed older people, a Vietnamese American made a powerful point through a poignant autobiographical statement. In all cultures influenced by Confucian thought, he said, family is the highest value, and older people are revered as being wise and deserving honor.

He had thus devoted his life to his family. He had risked everything to escape Viet Nam, and he had managed against great odds to get his family to the United States. Once in Houston, he had worked very hard to earn a living in a strange land. He was now teaching English as a second language to mostly Chicano young people (prompting from me Yogi Berra's famous response to the news that a Jew had been elected Mayor of Dublin, "Only in America!"), and he devoted all his resources to his family. By working very hard and saving, he had managed to provide a good education for his two daughters. They had just graduated from college and had gotten good jobs, but, he said with resignation more than anger in his voice, "They do not bring their money home!" That is, they were not pooling their money with his as if they were part of the family unit. What he was really saying, of course, was that his daughters had become individualistic

Americans while he was still culturally Vietnamese.

In Lawrence, Massachusetts, a Cambodian American and a Vietnamese American argued over the value and wisdom of bilingual education. The Cambodian American took his daughter out of the program after the second year because, according to him, she could read neither Cambodian nor English. One inferred from all he said, however, that he was very intent on blending into his new surroundings. On the other hand, the Vietnamese American was pleased with the same program because he thought it was very important for his children to maintain their cultural identity. Among the other reasons he cited for this was the fact that he had gotten an enormous amount of help from the Vietnamese community in getting started after his immigration. The ethnic community as a support group is an old story in America.

Out of all these conversations comes my sense that almost all Americans have an answer to the question of what it means to be an American, even though it may be somewhat inchoate until it is summoned up into full consciousness and tested. When examined, the question, "Who are we?", turns out to be three related questions: (1) what principles of governance for our common life should we hold dear, (2) what widespread traits of character or typical behavior give evidence that we share ideals of admired behavior and definitions of unacceptable behavior, and (3) how do we think about or describe the whole, the "ONE", and what does that imply about who is really included in the nation. "How wide the circle of we?"

The answer to the question of what it means to be an American usually begins with a belief in the universal values expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, a belief that what keeps our differences from developing into major conflict is a shared commitment to the idea of democracy, an agreement about how to resolve our disagreements. "Civic nationalism", this is usually called, and it is the foundation of almost all popular conceptions of the American identity. The ever changing size and shape of the gap between aspiration and achievement is a central theme of American history.

There is also here the problem that is inherent in our democracy, the problem that flows from the fact that we committed ourselves in the beginning to both Liberty AND Equality. In a society with a great deal of liberty, one will soon have a lot of inequality. That is true because people make different choices, have different amounts of luck, different desires, different talents, start in the race at different points on the track. They therefore will have very different degrees of success in life, especially success measured by material rewards.

Americans have handled the apparent contradiction between their two fundamental principles by saying that "equality" refers not to equality of condition but to equality of opportunity, equality before the law, and equal access to the political process. Unfortunately, as we are increasingly aware, people with more economic resources (sometimes referred to as "special

interests") have much more power to influence the political process than those with fewer economic resources. Equality of opportunity, then, "justifies" economic inequality, but economic inequality erodes democracy by providing unequal access to the political system. Because democracy is the core value of our society, this is a serious and continuing tension in our system, witness the current contentious political debate about reforming the way political campaigns are financed. The tension between liberty and equality can not be resolved; we must simply manage it.

There are other dilemmas as well. For instance, participants almost invariably expressed a desire to be tolerant of differences growing out of the cultural traditions or beliefs of another group; but some different practices were too much to tolerate. The more obvious examples of this are polygamy, female genital mutilation, ritual drug use, the subordination of women, putting the health of children at risk because of a religiously based refusal to use modern medicine, and so forth. The problem comes when trying to define what class of things must conform to the moral judgment of the majority of citizens and what class of things can be allowed to be different. Cultures may be equally legitimate, but they are not equally admirable in their every feature.

Assuming that these dilemma's can be managed without rupturing the social bonds, the question then becomes, "Is civic nationalism enough to hold us together?" Most Americans with

whom I have talked so far think that it is not, but they believe that there is an American culture - "conventional ways of believing and behaving" - that is shared across regional, religious, ethnic and racial lines. The problem is that for almost every trait one can cite as being characteristically American, there is its opposite as well. One can construct a veritable Yin and Yang of American culture.

Americans believe in equality and are instinctively suspicious of people who "put on airs." Yet, Americans are also fascinated by celebrities. We love to see exceptional people do exceptional things, and we are just as eager to see them crash after attaining exalted heights. Icarus is a naturalized American.

Americans proclaim that hard work is its own reward, but we are also constantly on the lookout for get-rich-quick schemes. From the gold rush to the land rush to their modern-day equivalents in Wall Street and Las Vegas, we think there must be a way to get rich without having to sweat. The lottery is a poor man's investment in the American Dream.

Americans thus may be motivated by greed, but we are also the most philanthropic people on the face of the globe. We are materialistic, but we have the highest percentage of church members among the developed industrial nations. New Age cults and mysticism thrive amongst people who are pursuing the main chance.

We are heterogeneous in almost every imaginable way, and

tolerance of difference is thought to be a virtue; but we have sprouted the Ku Klux Klan, the Nation of Islam, Know Nothings, Anti-Masons, Militias, and assorted nativist groups.

Ninety percent of Americans describe themselves as middle class, and middle class virtues are enshrined in our Puritan heritage. Yet we are also the land of instant gratification, of minute rice and fast food, of hot tubs and easy credit, of Hollywood escapism and theme park fantasies.

We think of ourselves as a practical and self-reliant people, but we have been host to more utopian experiments in communal living than any other nation on earth.

Competition is such a natural thing to Americans that almost every activity is organized into a contest so that we can find out who is the best at it. On the other hand, our national imagination is full of the icons of cooperation: barn raisings and corn huskings, wagon trains going west and communities rallying in selfless solidarity after a hurricane or flood or terrorist's bomb.

Individualism is an American fetish, but our real genius is for large-scale organization -- witness the transcontinental railroad and telegraph, corporate giants like IBM and GM, the winning of World War II, putting a man on the moon, and our devotion to team sports.

President Clinton in his Austin speech mentioned optimism as a traditional American trait, and he is certainly right, but there is also a long and honored tradition in Puritan America of

the Jeremiad.

I believe that it is virtually impossible to tell which one or the other member of these antipodal pairs is more typical than the other. The pairs indicate fault lines in the culture, locations where there is active stress. They are interesting for that reason. That is where the culturally action is.

Bearing in mind the questionable claim of such cultural traits to being useful in distinguishing Americans from others, it is nonetheless interesting to know how Americans think of themselves. Participants in the National Conversation mentioned not only the foregoing traits but a number of other characteristics they thought were especially American: a high value placed upon free speech and the other individual freedoms protected by the Bill of Rights; a tendency to favor the underdog; a belief that people should have a second chance and that social mobility is a good thing; the expectation of progress and that "things should work"; the belief that striving for success is the normal condition of life, and that individuals are obliged to attempt to improve themselves and their circumstances; that choices should be available; that education is a ladder for social mobility; and that individuals have a duty to contribute to their communities.

When one moves from individual traits to the task of imagining the group, one discovers three conventional categories in use. Most writers agree that the dominant cultural style at least until the 1960s was Anglo-American (growing out of British

and later out of more general European heritage), and that members of other groups were expected to conform to it.

The social revolution of the Sixties not only opened up the mainstream of opportunity to members of ethnic and racial minorities, but it replaced the notion of a single acceptable cultural style with a multiplicity of equally legitimate cultural heritages, an orientation known as pluralism. By then the theory of pluralism, rooted in the work of Horace Kallen and popularized first by Randolph Bourne, was half a century old.

The idea of America being a melting pot has existed since Hector St. John de Crevecoeur defined "this new man, this American" during the Revolutionary struggle, but it did not become popular as a goal of social policy until Israel Zangwill's play in 1908 struck a responsive chord amidst the anxieties about the lack of social cohesion resulting from the flood of immigration from eastern and southern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Anglo-Conformity does not work as a model because it does not allow the sort of dual and mixed identities that many Americans want, and because it denigrates the non-European heritages of many Americans. The Melting Pot metaphor provides for the huge amount of assimilation that has actually gone on in the United States, but it does not accommodate itself to the huge amount of persistence of pre-American cultural identities that is also part of our reality. Not only do these pre-American cultural identities persist, but Americans want to maintain them and will

resist any notion of Americanism that requires the obliteration of these identities of descent.

Cultural pluralism, on the other hand, comes in many forms, but in its most equalitarian form it does not recognize the historical fact of the primacy of British, European and Western Civilization's cultural parentage. All heritages are equally legitimate, but all were not equally influential. Furthermore, there is a separatist version of Pluralism that views the United States as simply a holding company for a collection of nations, an umbrella organization for diasporic national fragments whose members get their identities from, and owe their loyalties to, non-American states. Such a vision of America is seen as a dangerous pathology by most Americans. Even more important, pluralism in any of its current guises does not provide for a shared American culture, an area of overlapped cultures perhaps, that actually exists and that most Americans want. For these reasons, existing forms of pluralism are inadequate. Americans seem to want a way to think about diversity that is not provided by any of these existing models but goes beyond them.

There is a new conception of the American identity that one can assemble out of the talk created by the National Conversation and out of recent scholarship. (Endnote #4). First, the new conception is rooted in "civic nationalism", a shared belief in our democratic governance system and the universalistic values to which we committed ourselves in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Second, there is a sense that out of our history has come a set of meanings and attitudes and preferences and typical behaviors and tastes that amount to a national character. However difficult it is to specify it with accuracy, it is nonetheless real, and it is recognized by other Americans, and especially by foreigners encountering Americans.

Third, the new way of thinking about the American collectivity allows for both a common American identity and an identity of descent. It accommodates itself to the American devotion to mobility, both geographic and social. It permits change over time -- change in the boundaries and in the meaning of identities, as well as the creation and demise of identities. It accounts for both assimilation and for the persistence of pre-American identities. (Endnote #5) Most important, it recognizes the hybridity of American culture. That is, it reflects the understanding that when various world cultures encountered each other in North America over long periods of time, the relationships were not simply those of dominance and submission but of mutual influence. The resulting American culture therefore may be built on a British and European base, but it is more accurately understood as a hybrid of many cultures, and that it is not identical to any of its root cultures.

The National Conversation about American Pluralism and Identity is at flood tide now, so I invite you to launch your own deep draft vessel, either with or without flotation devices from the National Endowment for the Humanities. There is no more

important topic before the public at this time. You may draw your own conclusions from the conversation, of course; the harbor is big enough for many ships.

My own belief is that there is a national identity that we can share in a way that brings us together so that we can more easily solve our common problems but that also honors our differences. Based in democracy, this identity guards individual rights but recognizes the need for a sense of duty to the community. I worry that rights based individualism on the Left, and market driven libertarianism on the Right will leave insufficient room for a common vision for the common good. The question absent from our national catechism is, "What do I owe to my fellow citizens?"

I believe, further, that there is an inclusive historical narrative in which we all recognize not only the stories of our kith and kin but in which we acknowledge that we all are playing roles in a common story, in which we are all linked to each other across barriers of time and boundaries of race, in which we share the shame of our mistakes and the glory of our achievements, in which the meaning of America is to be found in the common ground of its aspirations of liberty and justice for all.

ENDNOTES

(1) Thus far, the NEH has awarded \$1.3 million for 29 projects through the special grant competition, and \$3 million for 33 additional projects that competed in our regular programs but are substantially related to the theme of the National Conversation. A film that is still in preparation and a small amount of extra funding for the state humanities councils are extending the conversation even more broadly. The cumulative total of projects funded through November 1995 is 1,540 "conversations" in 224 cities and towns in 39 states.

(2) There are certain criticisms that the National Conversation has had to face. Critics on the Right accused it of being a covert effort to impose a multicultural ideology on a naive public. Critics on the Left suspected that it was a camouflaged attempt to reimpose a pre-1960s Anglo-American version of the American identity. Some said there is no real problem in the United States, so why talk? Others insisted that the nation state is archaic and the source of much human misery, so we should be talking about cosmopolitanism. The search for cohesion is fundamentally misguided, another argument insisted, because it would deprive "the Other" of the right to a nonconforming identity. If the conversation is in English, isn't that already an oppressive statement? Talk is like crabgrass and doesn't need subsidizing, ran one line of criticism, missing the distinction between idle chatter and a purposeful humanities conversation

based on a text. What will you do, asked journalists circling like vultures over the cultural battlefield, when people start shouting at each other rather than talking to each other? Indeed, was not the subject so charged with emotion that talking about it might make it worse? Despite these attempts to make the National Conversation seem controversial, it has enjoyed an enthusiastic reception by humanities and public interest groups and by the general public.

(3) With financial and logistical assistance from the MacArthur Foundation, we brought together in Chicago a group of scholars to help us sharpen our focus, define our questions, and explore the subject. They were enormously helpful. They were: William Galston, Henry Louis Gates, Nathan Glazer, Amy Gutmann, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, Stanley Katz, Martin Marty, Martha Minow, Martha Nussbaum, Diane Ravitch, Renato Rosaldo, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Richard Sennett, Catherine Stimpson, Rennard Strickland, Ronald Takaki, Michael Walzer, Iris Marion Young, and Jamil Zainaldin. James Q. Wilson could not attend that meeting but participated in other ways and provided a short essay for the resource kit. The resource kit is available from the NEH; phone 1-800-NEH-1121

(4) In addition to my discussions and pilot conversations, and in addition to the advisers listed above, my thinking about the American identity has been enriched and informed by my reading in the works of the following scholars and writers, though my ideas do not coincide completely with any of them: Joyce Appleby,

"Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism," The Journal of American History (September 1992); Sheldon Wolin, The Presence of the Past (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Os Guinness, The American Hour (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Jean Elshtain, Democracy on Trial (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Robert Bellah, et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); Arthur Mann, The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); John Higham, "Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and Critique", The American Quarterly (June 1993); Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, edited and introduced by Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); David Potter, Freedom and Its Limitations in American Life, edited by Don Fehrenbacher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Benjamin Barber, Jihad Versus McWorld (New York: Times Books, 1995); David Hollinger, Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Michael Lind, The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Lawrence Fuchs, The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990); James Davison Hunter, The Culture Wars (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and Before the Shooting Begins (New York: The Free Press, 1994); and Cornel West, Race Matters (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

(5) As David Hollinger writes in Postethnic America,
"Postethnicity prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations,
appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide
scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial
groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the
normal life of a democratic society."