

FOREWARD

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Key figures in America's political, corporate, and academic life have often brought to their leadership roles the breadth, depth of understanding, and qualities of judgment that came uniquely from the great traditions of the liberal arts and humanities. It is not so clear any more that our culture or even our educational system, in particular, are now sustaining that tradition, which has nurtured public leadership in all three of these areas in the past.

Politically, Thomas Jefferson guided us into self-governing independence by believing that the pursuit of truth was the highest form of his pursuit of happiness. This pursuit is inherently non-competitive and communal. One person's discovery enriches another's search; and the pursuit of truth helps keep us from the pursuit of each other. The great Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, said that "truth is a noun only for God; for us it is only a verb." In the American tradition, it has been an active verb. Jefferson organized knowledge into three categories: memory, reason, and imagination. As a remembering, reasoning, and imagining people, we have become over the years more inclusive socially and more dynamic economically and culturally.

Jefferson gave us the ideal of a knowledge-based democracy in which more people would have more access to more knowledge and the freedom to use it in more ways than in any other large country. Jefferson wanted to be remembered for founding a university rather than for being President of the United States. His ranging personal library provided the nucleus of the Library of Congress, which now contains 130 million items. His ideal inspired our program to put the primary documents of American history and culture on the Internet for young people everywhere, in the hope that reasoning and imagining will be encouraged by broader access to the memory we are in danger of losing.

Liberal learning based on memory and accountable to reason has also inspired corporate leaders, such as the late J. Irwin Miller, the former chairman of Cummins Engine. He said: “. . . the humanities have something unique to say to a dehumanized society. They do not have to lecture the young or try to impose an ideology . . . rather, it seems to me that their timeless beauty is to let both the best and worst of our past speak in ways that will truly be heard. The humanities can hold up before us the best that humans accomplished over the centuries—the best selfless service, the best in reflective thought, the best in the creative arts, and the best in human wisdom. The humanities offer the best chance of demonstrating . . . the sweetness of cooperation over the sour destructiveness of the adversary mind, the painful glory of creative effort over the dull boredom of the low aim.”

In academia you can listen to an American scholar-statesman, Vartan Gregorian. His life story illustrates how the humanities can play an ever-broadening public leadership role not just in universities, but in libraries, foundations, and the public arena. Rising from a childhood in the Middle East, he has been an exuberant humanist with a rich sense of humor. To his early experience as a member of the Christian minority in a benevolent Muslim community, he has added insights learned from American westerns and the practical wisdom of people on the streets Tabriz, Beirut and Paris, through Texas and California, Philadelphia and Providence, to New York. And, he is supporting excellence in the humanities to bolster democracy in post-Communist Russia as well as post-modern America. Dr. Gregorian personifies even as he supports the American tradition to add new immigrants and new ideas without subtracting or discarding the old.

The United States is the only world civilization whose institutions were created entirely in the age of print. Democracy and humanism alike emerged from the culture of the book.

We now need—more than ever before—the skills of humane judgment that the humanities help develop—guiding us back from information on the Internet to the knowledge embedded in books—and moving on to the kind of practical wisdom that has historically made America both stable and innovative. Reaffirming the liberal arts core of our educational system and the capacity it fosters for humane dialogue will help equip us better to understand at a deeper level other nations as well as our own. A dangerous,

but increasingly interdependent world needs a deepening dialogue of cultures if we are to avoid an enduring clash of civilizations.

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