

Comments of  
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Before commenting on the subject at hand, I'd like to offer a few thoughts about NEH priorities this year.

As some of you know, I have determined to suggest a thematic initiative, one dubbed "Bridging Cultures." The reason I consider it important to refocus our efforts and reframe certain existing programmatic initiatives is to emphasize the need for citizens to recognize the cultural and historical context of American engagement in world affairs and, similarly, of our country's domestic politics today.

I am particularly concerned about American public manners and the discordant rhetoric of our politics. Words reflect emotion as well as meaning. They clarify – or cloud – thought and energize action, sometimes bringing out the better angels in our nature, sometimes lesser instincts.

Recent comments on the House floor have gathered much attention but vastly more rancorous, socially divisive assertions are being made across the land, and few are thinking through the meaning or consequences of the words being used. Public officials are being

labeled “fascist” and “communist.” And most bizarrely, significant public figures have toyed with hints of history-blind radicalism – the notion of “secession.”

One might ask what problem is there with a bit of hyperbole. The logic, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, is the message. If we lost 400,000 soldiers to defeat fascism, spent a fortune and lost thousands to hold communism at bay, and fought a civil war to preserve the union, isn't it our obligation in the humanities to provide perspective to words that contain warring implications. There is, after all, a difference between holding a particular tax or health care view and asserting that an American who supports another approach or is a member of a different political party is an advocate of an “ism” of hate that encompasses gulags and concentration camps. One framework of thought defines rival ideas; the other, enemies.

Conversely, just as polarizing attitudes can jeopardize social cohesion and even public safety, healing approaches such as Lincoln's call for a new direction “with malice toward none” can uplift and help bring society and the world closer together.

On the assumption that civilization requires civility, words matter. The language that describes intentions coupled with the underlying cultural understanding that underpins thought provide the basis not only for our actions but for how those who might be affected will react. How we lead or fail to lead in an interdependent world will be directly related to how we comprehend our own history, values and diversity of experiences and how deeply we come to understand and respect other peoples and other societies.

It is in this context that preservation is so important. Preserving documents is critical to advancing the study of history, and preserving artifacts is central not only to understanding cultural values but reflecting respect for the individuals and societies whose heritage is involved.

It is not surprising that one of the greatest gestures of respect between peoples is the exchange of a book or textile or craft or work of art. And there are few greater reflections of respect than assisting others to preserve their heritage.

One of the profoundest examples of respectful attention to cultural preservation involved a small cadre of American military officers who came to be called the “Monuments Men.” At the end of World War II they led in cataloguing and returning works of looted art from Nazi hands to countries of origin. It is only in the last decade that historians have begun to bring perspective to the monumental displacement of cultural artifacts that the Second World War precipitated. Unlike other nations that have too frequently absconded with art treasures as booty of war, the American military wisely recognized that cultural objects belonged to the people as their rightful heritage. It would have been a cultural insult of unpardonable dimension to have taken a different tack.

My first professional introduction to preservation came in my first campaign for Congress. As a fledgling candidate, I found myself on a series of occasions sharing presentations before local groups like Rotary and Kiwanis with a young woman who was our state’s first architectural historian. She would give a talk about what was then the National Trust’s initial “Main Street” program and then I would pontificate about

the merits of a balanced budget. Audiences would yawn at my comments but everyone would come up to the preservationist afterwards and thank her for her interest in their towns.

Not being a total fool, I figured out people cared for their heritage. And after the case I presented as a candidate was deemed inadequate that year by the electorate, I concluded that I had better exhibit more breadth and imagination if I were to try again. Hence the first step I took in preparing for the next election was to ask the preservationist, whose logic everyone seemed to prefer to my palaver, to share my last name. A year later my alert campaign staff came to the conclusion that the public would rather hear from her than me, so we shot a video of Deba standing in front of a Victorian, town-square structure suggesting something to the effect that “old buildings imply old values.”

Bride-taught, I came to appreciate old things and, accordingly, am delighted that the NEH has programs that range from preventive conservation, which includes both planning and implementation grants, to emergency preparedness and response.

Respecting and protecting cultural heritage is the foundation for much of the work of the NEH. We are proud of the work over the years of the Endowment in helping preserve collections at home and abroad, and advancing research and assisting translation of works based on these collections. We are particularly pleased to have assisted Heritage Preservation in developing various language versions of the Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel, which is as compact and useful a guide as I have ever seen for any emergency purpose.

In this context I am delighted to bring with me a scrap of paper that might be considered a governance document that I would like, for preservation purposes, to present to Larry Reger.

Larry, would you join me for a moment so I can present this document to you. Allow me to read the first sentence of a letter, dated today, from me to your project manager, Jane Long. It reads: “Dear Ms. Long: I am delighted to announce that the National Endowment for the Humanities will be awarding a grant of \$248,527 in support of Heritage Preservation’s project, “Alliance for Response: A National Program on Cultural Heritage and Disaster Management.”

By background, at the peer-review session held for preservation projects in the 1<sup>st</sup> week in September, the panel gave a strong recommendation of approval to this particular grant proposal, and last Friday our National Humanities Council met and concurred with the panel’s recommendation. As you know, we at the Endowment operate with dual peer-review guidance, and I am extremely pleased to approve their recommendations related to this grant request. I am also pleased to deliver the mail, saving the Federal government a stamp.

At this point, if appropriate, I would be happy to take any questions you may have, but before doing so, want to add my congratulations to an extraordinary public servant, Anne Radice, and an enormously thoughtful non-profit leader, Angelica Rudenstine – particularly deserving recipients of the Heritage Defender Award.

Thank you.