

A Remembrance

Challenges in a New Century: The Engaged Citizen

At the 1845th Stated Meeting, held in New York City on March 19, 2001, James O. Freedman spoke eloquently about his fundamental belief that intellectuals have a responsibility to inform and guide society. His presentation is reprinted below.

James O. Freedman

In one of the finest commencement speeches I know, William Faulkner told the graduation class of Pine Manor Junior College in 1953: “What’s wrong with this world is, it’s not finished yet. It is not completed to that point where man can put his final signature to the job and say, ‘It is finished, we made it, and it works.’”

Faulkner, of course, was right. The world is not yet “finished,” and for the Academy that means there is a daunting agenda of work to be done. Who can view the international scene and not find challenges in the elimination of nuclear weapons, the resettlement of international refugees, and the development of a foreign policy that at once protects our national interests and reflects our devotion to principles of human rights? Who can witness events in Africa and not be concerned with ethnic conflict and the problems of hunger, of malnutrition, of population control, and of disease, which afflict a great portion of that continent?

Who can look at the Third World and not be shaken by the relentless force of globalization and by a distribution of resources that thwarts the aspiration of millions of persons, that stunts the health of innocent children, and that threatens a global confrontation between the haves and the have-nots?

Who can survey the nation’s landscape and not be troubled by looming issues of sustainability – the pollution of our rivers, the poisoning of our air, the erosion of our soil, and the unremitting encroachment upon our wilderness and wildlife? Who can participate in American society and not appreciate that our country faces enduring questions of poverty, income inequality, and bringing minorities into the mainstream of educational and occupational opportunity?

Advancing truth, knowledge, and understanding on issues such as these is the goal of the American Academy. We have long admired the awe-inspiring achievements of those intellectuals who work in the natural sciences, in eliminating disease, perfecting new surgeries, exploring the universe, and mastering the atom. But we have been less than hospitable to – even skeptical of – intellectuals of other kinds.

Continued on page 45

In Memoriam



James O. Freedman

It is with deep sorrow that the Officers, Councilors, and members of the Trust of the American Academy mourn the loss of James O. Freedman, distinguished legal scholar, university leader, and President of the Academy from 2000 – 2001. Throughout his academic career and as President of the University of Iowa and Dartmouth College, Jim worked to advance diversity and social justice. In words and actions, he demonstrated the importance of what he called “an opening up of mind and spirit to a symphony of different persons, cultures, traditions, and languages.” Nothing was more important to him than the values of a liberal education and the concept of “intellectual wholeness” – values that are embodied in the work of the Academy.

Although he was able to serve as the Academy’s President for only a short time, he shared with all of us his extraordinary insight into the role of the intellectual in contemporary society. We remember, with special pleasure, the Academy’s trip to Paris in 2000; Jim was a wonderful host for our first Stated Meeting abroad. He symbolized what was uppermost in the minds of the Academy’s founders: the concept of the engaged citizen.

The depth of Jim’s knowledge, the breadth of his interests, the intensity of his passion for intellectual integrity, and his courageous personal battle against serious illness earned him a special place in the academic community and beyond. The Academy was honored to have him as a Fellow and as President.

The Engaged Citizen

Continued from page 44

Despite the demands of an increasingly complex society, the role of the intellectual in this country is seriously undervalued. In looking for immediate and specific results, we often ignore the less readily quantifiable but critical contributions of social scientists and humanists. Yet with respect to virtually every pressing social concern of our time – from race to poverty, from immigration to individualism – the writings of intellectuals have brought important issues forward, placing them on the national agenda and shaping our thoughts.

Suspicion and resentment of the life of the mind has had a long history in this country. In his seminal work, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter wrote in 1963 that intellectuals were thought of as either tucked away in a distant ivory tower or residing nearby and dangerous, threatening religious evangelicalism on the one hand and political populism on the other.

For those of an evangelical cast of mind, Hofstadter wrote, the rational pursuit of

truth seemed to threaten religious dogma; they believed that professors who taught the superiority of reason to faith were corrupting America's youth. For those of a populist cast of mind, intellectuals represented the authority of experts rather than the sovereignty of the people. They feared that power was slipping away from the "common man" into the hands of an educated elite – discrete, insular, and self-appointed – endangering democratic values and challenging egalitarian ideals.

Today, a generation after the publication of Hofstadter's book, suspicion of intellectuals reveals itself still: in widespread attacks on higher education and on the professorate in particular, in renewed calls for a narrow vocationalism and practicality in college curricula, and in perennial efforts to abolish the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts – both of which are vital sources of support for intellectuals.

Yet in a society excessively devoted to the bottom line – what William James called the "cash value" of ideas – intellectuals play a vital role in offering a more elevated approach to democratic debate. Through their teaching and writing, they free us from the tyranny of

shortsightedness by enlarging our understanding of historical and social context. They provide us with an alternative to a society of self-promotion and networking, a culture obsessed with who is in and who is out, who is hot and who is not, a country mesmerized by the tinsel of fame and the echo of sound bites.

So I speak not merely in defense of intellectuals but in celebration of them. We need to appreciate that intellectuals are gifted individuals with unconventional angles of vision, often endowed with an exceptional capacity to advance the common good. We need to acknowledge that intellectuals make significant and enduring contributions to our lives and to helping Americans exercise the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

We need, in short, to affirm that supporting the mission of intellectuals as critics, scholars, teachers, thinkers, and writers is one of the wisest investments we can make as a people. I hope the Academy will ever make that affirmation. ■

© 2001 by James O. Freedman



President James O. Freedman with William T. Golden (New York City) and Vartan Gregorian (Carnegie Corporation of New York) at the New York Stated Meeting on March 19, 2001.