
The Humanities and Global Engagement

On March 18, 2013, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl W. Eikenberry spoke at the Annual Meeting of the National Humanities Alliance about the essential role the humanities play in preparing Americans for effective global engagement. The meeting was held at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The following is an edited version of his remarks.



Karl W. Eikenberry

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You, the distinguished members of this audience, have devoted much of your professional careers to thinking about the humanities and advancing their cause. You know, far better than I, the intrinsic value of the humanities. Furthermore, you know

from your daily experiences the particulars of the growing crisis we are facing in schools and universities across our nation as the humanities continue to retreat to the margins of the curricula.

Therefore, I thought I could best contribute to today's discussion by moving beyond these topics, and draw from my own experience in an attempt to answer three questions. One: Why, at this point in history, are the humanities more fundamental than ever before to our country's successful global engagement? Two: How does grounding in the humanities prepare individuals for effective service in the international domain and to contribute to informed foreign policy? Three: What might be done to best advance the study and application of the humanities in our country?

In 1994, in a briefing to Congress, National Humanities Alliance Director John Hammer said,

From the NHA perspective, a significant amount of scholarly work in the humanities is of immediate value in addressing both domestic and international policy alternatives of many kinds. The humanities offer insights that contextualize and identify sources of conflict – whether they are economic, social, religious, or cultural; [they] focus on moral and ethical questions upon which all good public policy is based; and [they] illuminate the practical consequences of various strategic policy choices.

Hammer rendered this assessment almost two decades ago. The world we face and will face makes his words even more relevant and, indeed, urgent.

Consider these facts and trends:

Economics

- In 1985, U.S. nominal gross domestic product (GDP) was about one-third of the global total; today it is one-quarter and shrinking.
- In 2012, our nation's GDP was approximately seventeen times larger than it was in 1960, but the level of exports was eighty-one times higher and the level of imports 118 times higher.
- A just-published United Nations Development Programme study reports a "dramatic rebalancing of global economic power" and forecasts that the combined economic output of Brazil, China, and India will surpass that of the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy by 2020.
- China's GDP is projected to exceed that of the United States, becoming the world's largest, in 2025. If so, this will mark the first time in some 500 years that a Western power did not have the number one global economy.

Security

- Our Department of Defense and intelligence agencies generally conclude that the most serious threats to international order and U.S. security in this century are either transnational in nature (such as pandemics, terrorism, and climate change) or stem from resource scarcity (especially water and energy), or both. These are problems that inherently require multinational solutions.

Why, at this point in history, are the humanities more fundamental than ever before to our country's successful global engagement?

- Given our nation's budget realities, America's future application of military force will increasingly be contingent upon the participation of coalition allies, giving currency to the expression attributed, perhaps apocryphally, to Sir Winston Churchill: "Gentlemen, we have run out of money. So now we must think."

Politics and Diplomacy

- Over just the past few years, we have experienced the Arab Spring, the Saffron Revolution, and steadily rising popular discontent with the failures of capitalist market economies to satisfactorily address the age-old problem of socioeconomic inequality.
- Chinese Communist Party General Secretary and President Xi Jinping says he is a man with a dream, which he calls "the China Dream," only defined at this juncture by its collectivist juxtaposition to the individualistic-oriented "American Dream." His stated ambition is to lead a renaissance of his country and culture so that China can resume, as he says, "its rightful place in the world."

Based on these global developments and trends, political philosophers and scientists, historians, anthropologists, linguists, theologians, sociologists, regional specialists, and, I expect, most others in the humanities and social sciences can rest assured that the previously announced end of history has been temporarily postponed. You can safely anticipate at least another century of very productive full employment.

During the Cold War, the Central Intelligence Agency made a mock travel poster that included a dramatic photo from Mos-

cow's Red Square depicting a menacing Red Army tank formation participating in the annual May Day parade. The caption read, "The Soviet Union – come visit us, before we visit you."

I can imagine that such a poster updated to address today's world might feature a photomontage of global political activists, scientists, entrepreneurs, traders, soldiers, students, religious leaders, farmers, and the like, with the caption beneath proclaiming, "The World – come visit us, before you become irrelevant."

It is clear that we need a strong cadre of Americans in our government, military, business, civil society, academe, and beyond who have the right skills and experiences to help America stay connected with the world and shape outcomes that secure our national interests.

How then does grounding in the humanities prepare individuals for effective service on the international stage, and how can appropriate application of the humanities contribute to better global engagement?

History

Like all of you, I can count on one hand my really significant lifetime mentors and deep sources of inspiration. My short list includes Professor Jay Luvaas, who taught me advanced military history when I was a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

One day, as I was wearying of studies, preparing for graduation, and anticipating my first field assignment in the Republic of Korea, I asked Professor Luvaas how his lectures might help me in the years ahead when confronted with a specific tactical problem far from his classroom.

He replied, "Well, Cadet Eikenberry, the answer to your rather specific question is, 'not much.' The military profession is both art and science, and in this class we study art."

Professor Luvaas, though, went on to say,

Karl, let me suggest one of many things that hopefully you can take with you from this course. You can take perspective and context. In the coming years you may be called upon to lead soldiers in combat.

I know of no more demanding, stressful, or lonely task. But remember, no matter how difficult the situation you may face, commanders over the millennia have been there before you . . . Xenophon's 10,000, Wellington's troops at Waterloo, Grant's army at Vicksburg.

Different technologies, geography, weather, missions, and odds – but one constant for military leaders at all levels – they were under severe stress and felt extraordinary loneliness. And yet, they often survived and found ways to prevail. Historically speaking at least, you will never be alone.

Jay Luvaas became one of my life's spiritual companions. Whether serving as a platoon leader entrusted with forty infantrymen in Korea, commanding the coalition forces in Afghanistan, or even heading the United States embassy as our ambassador in Kabul, I remembered Professor Luvaas's words whenever things got tough. He was always there to offer perspective and context.

From personal experience I can say that we ignore the study of history at our own peril. When asked to name the greatest deficiency in formulating our strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade, my reply is always, "The absence of rigorous thinking in time, as Richard Neustadt would have said."

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guish the transient ripple from the rhythmic tide. They can help put hubris in check.

I am not suggesting that having historians at the table would have led to better policy choices in Iraq and Afghanistan, but after more than eleven years of war, trillions of dollars of expenditures, and many lives lost and terribly damaged, it is hard to imagine how the appropriate application of the discipline of history to policy formulation could have made things worse.

Archaeology and Museums

Over the course of my years of service in Afghanistan, the two most cost-effective U.S.-sponsored projects I can think of are the restoration of the great Citadel of Herat at one of the gates to Persia – Qala Iktyaruddin – whose origins date back to the time of Alexander the Great; and the renovation of the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul, which included putting in place a wonderful exhibit of artifacts from the pre-Islamic Gandhara Buddhist civilization that flourished in Afghanistan during the times of the later Roman and early Byzantine empires.

These efforts, priced in the few millions of dollars, not the tens and hundreds of millions associated with massive reconstruction projects, equipping and training security forces, and conducting military operations, paid two remarkable dividends.

First, they offered the people of Afghanistan, traumatized by decades of conflict and chaos, evidence of a rich culture and prior days of glory. With displays that included both some facts and some myths, the Herat Citadel and National Museum of Afghanistan are part of the foundation on which a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan must be built. They have made and will make incredible contributions to the promotion of national unity.

To stand on their head the words of the infamous Nazi playwright Hanns Johst, one

might hopefully say, “When I hear the word *gun*, I reach for my culture.”

Second, these two projects serve as good American legacy. The Afghan people, when they see the restored Herat Citadel and revitalized National Museum of Afghanistan, catch a glimpse of an America that has been, in parts of the world, obscured quite literally by the fog of war attending many military interventions.

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As Chief of Mission in Kabul, over time I came to regard our embassy’s cultural heritage program manager – aka, embassy archaeology specialist – as one of the most high-impact members on our team. She was also one of only two archaeologists to be found in any U.S. embassy around the world.

Music

In 2009, when I was ambassador, we made some modest contributions to the start-up Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul, which provides instruction in Western and traditional Afghan music to youth, regardless of means. Two months ago I attended a concert performed by the Institute’s orchestra here in Washington at the Kennedy Performing Arts Center.

The event turned out to be one of the most powerful and emotional musical concerts I have ever attended. The sense of pride engendered among the many Afghan nationals and Afghan-Americans who attended was overwhelming.

No one in the audience left the Kennedy Center that evening with a definitive answer

to the question of how Afghanistan will fare after the drawdown of U.S. and NATO military forces over the next eighteen months. Yet everyone in the audience could leave certain that the Afghan people, given the right environment, can and will excel on the world stage (no pun intended).

I visited Singapore recently and met with an old friend, the very worldly (and, to my mind, wise) Ambassador Tommy

Koh. I don’t think he would object to me disclosing a relevant point from our conversation.

Given my background with government and military service, I asked him the predictable question, “How can the United States improve its standing in Singapore and Southeast Asia?”

I expected him to dig into details about the Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Agreement or the specifics of future U.S. military deployments in the region. His answer was unexpected.

He simply said, “Send the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.”

The meaning was clear. It was not really about the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, as it is properly called, or even exclusively about music. His point was about deploying (sorry for the military terminology) “soft power.”

Victor Hugo wrote, “Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.” I take music as representative of the humanities and agree with Hugo – what the humanities offer

often cannot be verbally expressed but must not be left silent. America's historic advocacy of the humanities is a great source of international appeal, and we retreat from this advocacy at great cost.

The Study of Languages

In the fall of 2002, I arrived in Kabul on my first tour of duty in Afghanistan. Eager to rapidly learn as much as I could about the country and the people, I met with many Afghans and asked them about their history, culture, and customs.

One evening, I hosted General Asifi, then commander of the Afghan Border Police. Both of us relied on my very good Dari interpreter, the young Dr. Najib. The general went on at length about the famous traditions of the Afghan people. He was clearly proud of their renown as excellent hosts. Asifi became more animated, as did my interpreter in his effort to convey my guest's enthusiasm.

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Dr. Najib translated the general's culminating sentence as, "We Afghans have a long and glorious history of inviting foreigners to our country and then hospitalizing them."

Now, I think Dr. Najib got it wrong in this instance, and the proper translation should have been, ". . . and then showing them great hospitality." But the fact that I am not absolutely sure more than ten years later demonstrates the importance of language.

At a superficial level, this story is about the importance of accurate translations. But at another level, it demonstrates the critical

ancillary skills associated with proficiency in one or more foreign languages.

I believe that those who speak a foreign language with some degree of competency learn the art of carefully listening to others, an art that escapes many Americans abroad who specialize only in transmission. General Asifi was genuinely grateful to share a meal with an American Army general who listened.

Those who master foreign languages are also much more sensitive to the clarity of verbal communications, even when working through an interpreter in a language they do not understand. Even more important, they are better attuned to cross-cultural communications.

When I was a student at Nanjing University, a professor explained to me that if I spoke no Chinese, I would be a window-shopper admiring the goods on display from the street. If I went further and learned the language, I would be able to

enter the store and look around. But if I went even beyond this and learned the culture as well – made accessible, in part, through the portal of foreign language sensitivity – I would be invited by the shop owner into the back room to see the store's real treasures.

I submit that the surprise that attended the suddenness and scope of the Arab Spring indicates a need to have greater numbers serving in government and relevant policy circles who are capable of going beyond metaphorical window-shopping. However,

only the humanities and social sciences – enabled in part by language competency – can give one entrée and access to the store.

How might we promote humanities research and education? Here are three modest suggestions.

First, make the humanities more relevant to contemporary problems – not only in the universities but (and this is perhaps even more important) in K-12 and continuing education programs.

In his classic *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides says much about the conflict between Athens and Sparta, about so-called rising and status quo powers. I have seen articles by learned American authors in recent years that cast Sino-American relations as being governed by the "Thucydides Trap."

Perhaps. However, the historical analogy is not entirely apt. China and the United States are integrated into a common world economic order (albeit imperfectly), whereas Athens and Sparta maintained separate trading systems, the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League. Nor, for that matter, did Athens run huge trade surpluses with Sparta and maintain large amounts of Spartan treasury notes.

Why not conclude a study of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* by assigning essays on contemporary Sino-American interaction, and then have students argue over how Thucydides himself would see parallels and divides between his own account of the Athenian-Spartan rivalry and the anticipated trajectory of U.S.-China relations?

An appreciation of the humanities is acquired through long practice and study, but demonstration of the humanities current relevance through association can serve as a powerful catalyst.

Second, I encourage all of you in the humanities to engage in important debates over public policy when you have something to say – which should be often. I am

not sure your voices are adequately heard. In military terms, I am afraid you are at times AWOL (or absent without leave).

For instance, I mentioned earlier the increasing popular dissatisfaction in many parts of the world with the failing of market economies to provide sufficient equality of opportunity, variously argued as equality of outcome.

Every week, I read op-eds by distinguished economists who debate the degree to which economic or socioeconomic inequality exists in our country and who then go on to speculate on causes, consequences, and cures.

I do not see the same degree of engagement from relevant disciplines within the humanities. Had the Gini coefficient, formulated in 1912, been popularized several centuries earlier, would Rousseau have been content to reduce his arguments on inequality to the need to achieve a national Gini index of below 0.25?

Those of you in the humanities need to reclaim your space in many of the great public debates of the times. This argument relates, of course, to my first suggestion about establishing contemporary relevance.

Third, and last, inspire your students to explore the humanities.

As I approached the end of my sophomore year at West Point, I resolved to drop Mandarin Chinese, having completed the two years of mandatory foreign language studies at the Academy. I very much enjoyed my Chinese language classes and was making good grades, but they were consuming much study time. I was concerned because I was soon to face a heavy load of science and engineering courses in my junior year.

My Chinese language professor, Mr. Jason Chang (along with Professor Luvaas, he was one of the few civilian instructors at West Point at that time), learned of my decision and called me to his office to persuade me to reconsider.

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He said, “Mr. Eikenberry, you need to participate in the Chinese Language Club’s trip to Taiwan this summer before you decide.”

A very wise nineteen-year-old, I told him I had made up my mind and that while joining the trip would be interesting, it would be a waste of resources.

He persisted and I reluctantly agreed.

So at the age of nineteen, off I went to the Republic of China, as we called it then. During the trip, I enjoyed:

- Mandarin classes at the prestigious State Department Language School at Taichung;
- exotic dinners in language instructors’ homes;
- training with Chinese cadets at the Military Academy at Kaohsiung;
- driving up the east coast of Taiwan to Hualien and visiting Taroko Gorge;
- flying to the offshore island of Quemoy (or Kinmen) and listening as Nationalist Army forces and the People’s Liberation Army (contending with the Cultural Revolution at the time) exchanged propaganda insults over loudspeakers;
- walking the night market of Taipei.

All are still vivid memories. When I returned to West Point in the fall of 1971, I told Professor Chang to sign me up for two more years of Chinese language classes. Two more years then seamlessly became a

lifetime avocation. Professor Chang knew his mark well.

As those of you in the humanities discuss the critical and inescapable need for support for the humanities, never forget the role of inspiration in exciting the next generation, so that the torch can be passed to them. I urge all of you to be Professor Chang. ■

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