

AAAS Report *The Heart of the Matter*
University of West Georgia Humanities Symposium
Smithsonian Institution Secretary
Wayne Clough
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(text as prepared for delivery)

Thank you.

Chancellor Huckaby, Vice Chancellor Davis, President Marrero, and Provost Rice, thank you for joining us for dinner on what is a busy night on the West Georgia campus. It is a pleasure for me to be here and to recall the opportunities I had to visit this beautiful campus back when I was president of Georgia Tech. I understand our gathering is competing with another important event, and that is not Halloween, but the football game between the Wolves of West Georgia and the Panthers of Florida Tech. The game begins when we are into our discussions that follow dinner, so we will excuse anyone if you need to take a peek at your smartphone for a score update.

I want to thank Randy Hendricks, Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, for the invitation and for West Georgia serving as the statewide host site for tonight's important discussion on the report *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation*. This report was the result of a two yearlong study conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences. As a member of the Academy, I was honored to serve on the Commission which was co-chaired by Richard Brodhead, the president of Duke University, and John Rowe, CEO emeritus of Exelon Corporation. The study was an outgrowth of a request by a bipartisan group of members of Congress, and the report has been received with great acclaim. It is fortuitous and most appropriate that we can hold this discussion in concert with the long-standing and prestigious Annual Interdisciplinary Conference in the Humanities that has been hosted here at West Georgia for 28 years. Let me also add congratulations to Dr. John Ferling, a long time faculty member here at West Georgia who has just received one of the 2013 Governor's Awards for the Arts and Humanities.

The Commission explored the state of the humanities in our nation. All of us here tonight assume the humanities are essential to our democracy, our global competitiveness, and a full and meaningful life. Yet there are indicators that suggest the understanding of the role of humanities in our lives and our nation is on the decline. This is reflected in reduced support for our

humanities-based institutions, a development that threatens our future. Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities has declined by approximately 16% between 2010 and 2013, and right here in Georgia, since 2008, funding for your Georgia Humanities Council has been reduced from roughly \$250,000 to \$50,000. And just today in the *New York Times* there was a front-page article about the declines being seen in humanities majors at many of our nation's universities. So I am thankful for this opportunity tonight to discuss the findings of *The Heart of the Matter* and begin a dialogue that can reverse our current course. I am honored to be one of the participants in the discussion tonight with my distinguished colleagues, Rosanna Warren, Esther Mackintosh, and Robert Schaefer.

Let me also say welcome to Jamil Zainaldin, president of the Georgia Humanities Council. Jamil and the Council are great partners with the Smithsonian in bringing cultural programming to numerous communities here in Georgia, giving them access to events that enrich the lives of all citizens.

I was born in Douglas, Georgia, a small town in the south of the state, and appreciate what these opportunities provide to such communities. Our Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) serves this role nationally, reaching nearly 5 million Americans across the country every year. The Georgia Humanities Council is one of SITES' longest and deepest collaborative partners in the Museum on Main Street (MoMs) program. Next year, MoMs will commemorate its first 20 years, during which time it has benefited from collaborations with 47 state humanities councils, reaching 1,246 small towns across the country. And just ending a highly successful two-year tour across the state, *New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music* is a perfect illustration of how the Georgia Humanities Council, working with the Smithsonian, was able to revive interest in local cultures, many of which are endangered.

The word humanities has Latin roots meaning "to be human." On the National Mall in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, one of our new exhibitions is the Hall of Human Origins. It follows the arc of human history beginning 6 million years ago based a compilation of the findings of archeology and paleontology from the past 200 years. The principle question asked in the exhibition is "what does it mean to be a human?" There have been many species of humans, all of them now extinct but ours, *Homo sapiens*. We are a recent phenomenon, having been around only about 200,000 years, a blink in the eye of the history of the Earth. The steps in becoming human revolve around evolutionary and technological developments, most of which related to developing better survival skills. But somewhere around 50,000 years or so ago in Europe, *Homo sapiens* began creating figurative and dimensional art.

There is a debate about when humans arrived here in the Western Hemisphere, but some experts, and several scholars at the Smithsonian are among them, believe that evidence supports that humans migrated from Europe working their way along ice fronts to the Atlantic coast as early as

20,000 years ago. At that time, mammoths and mastodons roamed widely across North America. It was not surprising that at one of the locations that supported the Atlantic migration, a mammoth tusk was found. What was surprising was that it had a depiction of a mammoth carved into it. Art came along with the earliest migrants to our shores. Clearly one element of what it means to be a human is art—both the innate desire to make it and the inherent pleasure of looking at it. This is as true today as it was 20,000 years ago—art and the humanities inform and enrich our lives.

The commission report, *The Heart of the Matter*, advances three societal reasons for a greater appreciation of humanities:

- Educate Americans in the knowledge, skills, and understanding they will need to thrive in a 21st-century democracy
- Foster a society that is innovative, competitive, and strong
- Equip the nation for leadership in an interconnected world

I relate to these through my background and training in engineering. Not everyone would see this connection, but it was always obvious to me that to live a full life, reading, art, history, and culture were critical. When I was interviewing to be president of Georgia Tech, my undergraduate alma mater, I told the search committee that if Georgia Tech wanted to be a great university, it would have to embrace a larger role for the humanities. And that engineering, business, and architecture graduates of the future would have to compete in a global economy where there would be twice as many very bright Chinese engineers as produced in the U.S., all of whom spoke English. The edge we could provide was in graduating young men and women who used both sides of their brains and were able to understand cultures of other countries and move with ease across societal boundaries. To me this meant increasing the students' exposure to the humanities during their college experience.

After I arrived, I began to review information about the students coming to Georgia Tech, about 60% of whom were there to major in engineering. In looking over several years of a survey of the freshmen, I found a clear majority of them said they played musical instruments in high school, yet the options for them to pursue this outlet when they arrived on campus were minimal. We addressed this by adding opportunities for participation in musical groups and found it was hard to keep up with the demand. We added options for study abroad and found not only was it hard to keep up with the demand, but that the number of students taking languages quadrupled.

In the course of our first capital campaign, we funded two endowed chairs for poetry. Poetry courses were added along with a poetry reading series, and again students responded by signing up in large numbers. Our students obviously welcomed more exposure to the humanities. And while this was a good thing in itself, it did not take long to manifest its impact with graduation

rates that rose by almost 15%, and to learn from alumni surveys that our graduates realized they had a competitive advantage gleaned from a humanities-based educational experience. Bottom line: it worked for our students, and, more importantly, our nation will be the beneficiary with more engineering graduates and better ones at that.

Let me make a final point regarding what the report calls our 21st-century democracy and the importance of humanities to sustaining it. Our present democracy has its roots in the thoughts of our founders who clearly understood the need for a well-rounded education for all citizens if our democracy was to survive. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” And as James Madison wrote, “What spectacle can be more edifying or more seasonable, than that of liberty and learning, each leaning on each other for their mutual and surest support.”

At the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, in Flag Hall, right in front of the new home of the Star-Spangled Banner, we hold citizen naturalization ceremonies. Last year I participated in one such ceremony with former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, herself a naturalized citizen of our country. At the ceremony, 12 people from 12 different countries took the oath of citizenship, among them U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant Cristhian Lujan, born in Mexico. Sergeant Lujan stood out in his crisp Marine uniform, and I learned later in talking to him that in the course of his military service he had fulfilled tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. You have to think about that, a man who volunteered for our military and risked his life for us, who was not yet a citizen of our country. I asked him about this, and he said joining the Marines was his way of qualifying for American citizenship. When asked what becoming a U.S. citizen meant to him, he said, “I will have a say, a voice that will be heard. The right to vote and make a decision that will count toward my future and that of my family.” Would that every citizen who is born here understood that sentiment!

The American History Museum has a new website, *Preparing for the Oath*. The website, which we designed in cooperation with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, allows aspiring citizens to prep for the civics portion of the citizenship test. They use quizzes, videos, and activities designed around artifacts from the Smithsonian’s collections—both famous ones, like Thomas Jefferson’s writing desk, and lesser-known ones, like census posters from the 1930s and ’40s. It would be edifying if every citizen of this country had to periodically pass the citizenship test just like we do to keep our driver’s licenses. I believe we can all agree that being a good citizen is just as important as being a good driver. Of course, my guess is in a country where only 18% of the students can pass a standardized history test, the numbers passing the citizenship test would not be encouraging.

Rather than viewing this too negatively, I believe that the humanities, taught in a way to

encourage critical thinking and with creative approaches, can be not only fruitful, but also fun. I believe the experience we had at Georgia Tech with our students showed just that. And at the Smithsonian we are encouraged that our visitor-ship overall has steadily increased by 5 million in the past five years, and by 60 million to our websites. In part because the experiences are fun, maybe even joyful.

As John Lithgow, one of the members of the Commission said in a speech titled, *Joy in a Fretful World*, “Democracy can only function with an educated citizenry, grounded in the humanities! The humanities...create a habit of learning that lasts a lifetime! They are a source of self-knowledge! Life without them is drab and joyless! Joy! That's the word! Joy! The arts and the humanities instill JOY!”

That is the heart of the matter. That is what we must do if the role of the humanities is to be restored to its rightful place in our country.

Thank you.