

S P E E C H

# “Beach Books,” Liberal Education, and Moral Relativism

By Thomas Lindsay, Ph.D.

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Good evening,  
As you have just heard from Ashley and David, NAS has made the study of summer readings a primary area of focus, and for an excellent reason. As Peter Wood writes in the introduction: Universities today are far from quiet places. They are a flurry of activity. Thus, when a school stops to reflect on the choice of summer reading, it tells us something about its soul—about how it understands its deepest purposes, its reason for being.

For its work over the past several years in this project, NAS is to be commended. Its reports provide a window into a college’s heart and mind.

As you’ll read, most colleges envision the chief purpose of a common reading program as promoting community on campus as well as student activism once in the outside world.

Now, on the one hand, it is encouraging that a growing number of schools are concerned about community building, as are we. That’s good news.

The bad news, as we know, is that the intellectual foundation of these schools’ efforts is constitutionally incapable of establishing a genuine community, because it asserts that all we share in “common”—and hence all that can serve as a foundation for community—is “self-creation” rather than rational discovery, which is classical liberalism’s focus. This is a consequence of moral and cultural relativism.

Having jettisoned the conviction that there are authoritative standards of virtue and vice, equality in our rights (the classical liberal project) is no longer sufficient, and must be replaced by equality in our lifestyles. Hence, indiscriminate toleration, even “celebration,” supplants the older republican concern with civic virtue. But whereas earlier versions of community building sought to subordinate “each to the all,” the new regime looks to subordinate “all to the each”—that is, to each and every, necessarily idiosyncratic, version of self-creation. In short, morality grounded in nature’s amorality; equality grounded in reason’s impotence at “prioritizing” values; and liberty grounded in our inability to distinguish liberty from license—these are the leading characters in today’s drama.

America’s Founding stands or falls on the power of human reason. With the dismissal of the notion that our rationally discerned and grounded rights are the fundamental facts of humanity, that which is now argued to be fundamental—be it class, power, creativity, race, gender, sexual orientation—no longer unites us, as did classical liberalism’s worldview, but, instead, forever separates us. The new regime is an education in separatism. Be the distinctions proletarian/bourgeois, superman/last man, or “sun people”/“ice people,” all find our fundamental differences to outweigh the sameness to which our Declaration of Inde-

pendence looked in positing a human nature (essence or soul) and on which its rights doctrine has relied. Stated simply, humanity-as-standard-less-creativity leaves us with no truly common appeal to make. From this it follows that the rationally discovered and grounded, “self-evident truths” of human nature, as espoused in the Declaration of Independence, are nothing but ideology. When reason, which served as the core of the liberal definition of human nature, was emasculated, so was any possibility that humanity could discover an objective natural standard on the basis of which we might compromise in the name of respecting equal rights: mere equality in rights is not only insufficient, it is insulting and oppressive in the eyes of those for whom only equal dignity can be justice.

So then, what is left? All that is left as a support for community is the solitary, unsupported “self.” The question then becomes how to construct community out of a diversity of unconnected “selves.” Only by celebrating diversity, i.e., only the community that is not a community can satisfy the self without a soul (fixed nature). Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised that the new “anti-community” community requires for its implementation the uniform imposition of diversity—celebration on those who would claim any standard above standard-less self-creation. Stated differently, these schools aim to remedy classical liberalism’s perceived failure at supporting community, but they do so on the basis of relativism; hence, diversity-as-monolith (political correctness) imposes

the communal value of value non-imposition (= diversity-celebration) in the name of the lawless liberty of the soulless self.

We have the opportunity to advance the best basis for community, certainly for an academic community—the community of would-be knowers. Wealth and power and glory, when we share them with others, are decreased for each of us. Recall Henry V’s St. Crispin’s Day Speech before the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. He remarks on the fewness of their numbers, and he rejoices in it. “We will have to share in our glory with fewer!” But, unlike glory or wealth, wisdom multiplies when shared, rather than being diminished. The community of would-be knowers is the highest community, as we learn from Plato’s *Republic*. But the quest for Truth presupposes that there is Truth, with a capital T. And this is what our relativistic universities deny. Until and unless we restore the possibility of the quest for wisdom, “beach books”—and every community-building project—will fail—as will its students’ capacity to maintain our experiment in self-government.

As I said, that’s the bad news. But our prospects may not be entirely discouraging. The American Academy’s unabashed America-bashing is beginning to be noticed by others—thanks in no small part to the efforts of the NAS. We have been told never to let a crisis go to waste. And in this crisis we have opportunities before us, which I look forward to discussing during Q&A.

Thank you. ★

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In 2006, Lindsay joined the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) staff as director of the agency’s signature initiative “We the People,” which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was named deputy chairman and chief operating officer of the NEH in 2007.

Lindsay received his B.A. (*summa cum laude*) M.A., and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He published the American government college textbook *Investigating American Democracy* (with Gary Glenn) as well as numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, and *American Journal of Political Science*. Other articles on higher-education reform have appeared in *Forbes*, *Real Clear Policy*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Washington Examiner*, *Knight-Ridder Syndicate*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *American Spectator*, and *Austin American-Statesman*, among others.

In recognition of his scholarship on democratic education, Lindsay was the 1992-93 Bradley Resident Scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

