



2006 NATIONAL HUMANITIES MEDALISTS

Two Middle East scholars give insight to contemporary conflicts, while the founder of the History Channel brings the past to life for millions through television. They are among the ten recipients of the National Humanities Medal who were honored by President George W. Bush at the White House on November 9, 2006. The medals are given each year to individuals and institutions that have deepened the nation's understanding of the humanities.

FOUAD AJAMI

"I work on controversial material," says Beirut-born scholar Fouad Ajami. "Sometimes I wish I were working on the Renaissance or some less loaded subjects. But I have the burning grounds of the Arab-Islamic lands as a canvas, and the controversy comes with that."

In his most recent book, *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq*, Ajami says he sought to "chronicle the difficult encounter between Iraq and its American liberators." Ajami has traveled to Iraq six times since 2003 and was granted an audience with Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani. He has also met with the U.S. military. "I found hope and heartbreak in Iraq, and consider this expedition to be a noble war, despite all its frustrations and setbacks."

Ajami arrived in the United States from Beirut as a young man, with the assumption that he would return to Lebanon and enter politics. After earning a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Washington at age twenty-seven, he remained in this country and became a U.S. citizen.

Ajami is the Majid Khadduri Professor of Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies and has been teaching and writing on the modern Middle East and Arab political thought and culture for more than three decades. More than three hundred essays, chapters, and commentaries penned by Ajami have appeared in publications such as the *New Republic*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Foreign Policy*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He has been a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report* since 1989 and is a member of the editorial board of *Foreign Affairs* magazine.

JAMES M. BUCHANNAN

James M. Buchanan, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Economic Science, developed a program that changed the way economists analyze economic and political decision-making. He examined how politicians' self-interest and noneconomic forces affect government economic policy.

"Public choice is summarized as the extension and application of the tools and methods of economics to the subject matter of political science," he says. "That is, to the behavior of persons in public choosing roles—as voters, representatives, legislators, bureaucrats, political agents generally—and to the functioning of the institutions within which they act in these roles.

"In a shorthand sense, I have referred to public choice as 'politics without romance,' but the program also embodies attention to prospects for changing the rules with the purpose of getting better results," he says. "In a general sense, public choice proceeds from the presupposition that political agents are just like everyone else."

Buchanan, the advisory general director of the James Buchanan Center for Political Economy at George Mason University, first outlined this theory in a book he wrote with Gordon Tullock in 1962, *The Calculus of Consent*. Applying economic analyses to the political arena has had a major impact on public policy. Public choice theory says economists can no longer assume government intervention alone will fix economic problems but that economists must also look at how government actions are implemented.

Buchanan, the son of a Tennessee farmer, received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1948 and has held teaching positions at the University of Virginia, the University of California at Los Angeles, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

NICKOLAS DAVATZES

When Nickolas Davatzes launched the History Channel in 1995, he assumed it would be a niche channel with modest distribution. Today, the History Channel has nearly 150 million viewers worldwide, through programming in more than 130 countries.

“People often think of history the way they learned it in high school or college: as memorizing dates,” says Davatzes, founder of A&E Television Network and the History Channel. “One of the wonderful things about television is that it makes things come alive.”

Born in New York City, Davatzes received a bachelor’s degree in economics and a master’s degree in social psychology from St. John’s University, where he now sits on the board of trustees. His interest in history was inspired by his father, who served in the Greek army in the 1920s before immigrating to America and fighting for the United States during World War II. “He saw a lot about the world,” Davatzes says. “And, of course, growing up in a Greek immigrant family, I heard a lot about the glories of ancient Greece.”

Davatzes serves as cochairman of the Board of Directors of Cable in the Classroom, an initiative in which networks and cable providers supply commercial-free educational programming to 250,000 teachers in public schools across the country. “Teachers are looking for tools that pique the interest of their students,” Davatzes explains.

One of the projects of which Davatzes is most proud is *The Crusades: Crescent and the Cross*, a 2005 History Channel documentary chronicling the two-hundred-year struggle between Christians and Muslims for control of the Holy Land. “It speaks to the Mideast conflict and how long it has existed. I think sometimes we in the Western world don’t understand the driver on the other side very well.”

ROBERT FAGLES

“Every translation is different,” says classicist Robert Fagles. “It has to do with the tone of voice of the translator. Each has a distinctive badge, each comes with its own vocal DNA,” he says.

Fagles’s translations are known for their emphasis on contemporary English phrasing while being faithful to the original. His translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were both best sellers. Now, he has tackled the Roman epic, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. As a comparative literature professor at Princeton University for more than forty years, Fagles was always involved with the classics. “Translation is an ongoing field of endeavor throughout all of English letters. Finally, there came a time when I wanted to try my hand at it myself.”

Fagles translated *The Iliad* in 1990 and *The Odyssey* in 1996. Fagles believes *The Odyssey* still offers lessons to today’s reader. “I think we learn fortitude is an important virtue. We learn from Homer that adventure and being alive to experience are very important virtues,” says Fagles.

Fagles won the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award of the Academy of American Poets in 1991 for his translation of *The Iliad* and in 1996 received an Academy Award in Literature for his translation of *The Odyssey*. He also received the PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal for lifetime achievement in translation. Fagles has translated Sophocles's *Three Theban Plays* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. He has published a book of his own poems titled *I, Vincent: Poems from the Pictures of Van Gogh*.

THE HOOVER INSTITUTION

As a library and public policy research center, the Hoover Institution supports the study of politics, economics, and international affairs, focusing on the role of individual liberty safeguarded from government intrusion. It was founded by Herbert Hoover after the outbreak of World War I.

"Hoover was interested in gathering materials during times of war and revolution in order to find a way to promote peace," says John Raisian. "He thought that scholars could work on these documents and look for solutions that could lead to peaceful coexistence."

Raisian has led the Hoover Institution for the past seventeen years and has seen the number of scholars using its collections grow to seven thousand last year. The collaboration of researchers has led to the creation of journals, research projects, and roles for advising governments. About one thousand opinion pieces are written yearly by Hoover scholars from forty countries, published by newspapers around the world such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*.

Among Hoover alumni are Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State George Schultz, Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, and Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the House of Representatives.

"If you're looking at the community of think tanks, Hoover is unusual in at least one important respect, our vast archival collections," says Raisian. Twenty-five miles of shelf space hold decades of materials on war, revolution, and peace. The content of the library's one million volumes—including sixty million documents and one hundred thousand political posters—spans continents and details political and economic history from China to the United States to Russia.

MARY LEFKOWITZ

Mary Lefkowitz says she found her passion for the classics at age sixteen while visiting ancient Roman ruins in Britain, France, and Italy. As a high school student at the Brearley School in Manhattan, Lefkowitz studied Latin and Greek. "It was partly that the language was so interesting but also the idea of understanding your past, and coming into contact with the past of so long ago that was really exciting."

Lefkowitz has written three books on the role of women in ancient societies: *Heroines and Hysterics*, *Women in Greek Myth*, and *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, which she coedited with Maureen B. Fant and which is considered the standard sourcebook in the field.

"Readers get a negative impression of women at first in ancient literature but when you look a bit harder you see they had an important role, behind the scenes and also sometimes upfront," says Lefkowitz. She has also been a leading defender of interpreting the history of ancient civilizations through traditional standards of historical evidence. Her controversial books, *Not Out of Africa* and *Black Athena Revisited*, with coeditor Guy MacLean Rogers, examine the factual evidence for an Afrocentric approach to the origin of the ancient world and disputes its plausibility. She argues against the idea that Europeans stole from African culture.

Lefkowitz is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, Emeritus at Wellesley College, where she received her degree in 1957 and taught for forty-five years. She received her Ph.D. in classical philology at Radcliffe in 1961. Her most recent book, *Greek Gods, Human Lives*, looks at the role of the gods in Greek myths.

BERNARD LEWIS

Middle Eastern scholar Bernard Lewis says today's conflict between Christendom and Islam is one that goes back more than fourteen centuries. He describes it as a clash between the relativists and the triumphalists. While some religions accept the legitimacy of other faiths (relativists), both Islam and Christianity in their traditionalist forms hold unbending views.

"The Christian world and a large part of the Islam world no longer hold that kind of triumphalist view," says Lewis, the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies Emeritus at Princeton. "But what we are dealing with is the triumphalists of the Muslim world and they are setting the terms of the conflict. That's the difficulty. If only the relativists on both sides could get together I'm sure agreement would be possible."

Lewis's career in Middle Eastern studies began with a facility for and a fascination with languages at the age of thirteen. "I started out learning the few lines of Hebrew I needed to know for my bar mitzvah, normally that's what's expected," he says. "To everyone's surprise, especially my parents, I wanted to continue with Hebrew after I completed my bar mitzvah work." He went on to study Aramaic and Arabic.

Hebrew and a love of history drew him to Middle Eastern studies at the University of London. His scholarship earned him a prize from the university and soon he was given another opportunity. The university offered him a stipend of 150 pounds to study in the Middle East. When he returned to London he became an assistant lecturer and pursued his Ph.D.

World War II erupted and he reported for duty. With his facility for languages, Lewis was quickly transferred from a tank unit to one in intelligence and was sent to the Middle East. After the war he returned to the University of London and continued teaching Islamic history until 1974. That same year he moved to the United States to teach at Princeton and at the Institute for Advanced Studies. He officially retired in 1986. At age ninety he still keeps an office at Princeton, works on projects, and advises an occasional student. Lewis has written more than thirty books, the most recent being *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*, published in 2004.

MARK NOLL

"I am a historian who happens to be an evangelical Christian," says Mark Noll, the Francis A. McAney Professor of History at Notre Dame. "The two are important to me but it is possible to distinguish these identities. In my work, I'm not an advocate for Christianity but because I'm an evangelical I am drawn to study religion and the history of religion."

As a historian, Noll has established himself as a leading scholar on the history of Christianity in the United States. He has authored more than thirty books on the subject, his most recent is *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*.

For Noll, the development of the evangelical Protestant church in the United States is a key component of the nation's history. "If you want to understand the early history of the United States," he says, "you want to understand these churches."

"From 1790 through the next one hundred years, these churches played a most active role in civil society," says Noll. "By 1860 there were fifty-five-thousand Protestant churches in the United States that more or less followed evangelical traditions, about twenty thousand being Methodists," says Noll.

Noll received his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University and taught at Wheaton College for twenty-seven years before moving to Notre Dame last fall. He is the founder of The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicalism and the former president of The American Society of Church History. In 2005, *Time* magazine named him one of the twenty-five most influential evangelicals in the United States.

MERYLE SECREST

“I don’t like to spend a lot of time with people I don’t like,” biographer Meryle Secrest admits. “I always start with a subject I really love. You’ve got to be passionately interested—if you’re doing it as a chore, it will come through in your writing.”

Born and educated in Bath, England, Secrest moved to Canada after World War II and began a career in journalism that would eventually carry her to the *Washington Post*. Although she often wrote profiles of public figures, her first biography came to her unexpectedly. During a visit to the then National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Secrest encountered a fascinating self-portrait by the American expatriate artist Romaine Brooks. After writing biographical profiles of her for the *Post* and the *Smithsonian*, Secrest was invited to turn her research into a book.

Since publishing *Between Me and Life: A Biography of Romaine Brooks* in 1974, Secrest has written biographies of Salvador Dalí, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Joseph Duveen, and Bernard Berenson. Of the many intriguing characters she’s studied, Secrest says her favorite is Frank Lloyd Wright. “He’s one of the few authentic geniuses I’ve ever had the honor to study,” she says.

Until recently, Secrest taught creative nonfiction as a visiting instructor at George Mason University. She says she often emphasized the importance of accuracy to her students. “There’s a kind of honor system in biography—there are no fact checkers,” she explains. “Some students of mine thought nothing of putting thoughts into someone’s head. If you don’t know what happened, you don’t say it.”

Currently, Secrest is at work on a biography of the Italian painter and sculptor Amedeo Modigliani. In June 2007, she will publish a memoir of her craft called *Shoot the Widow: Adventures in Biography*.

KEVIN STARR

Kevin Starr is a fourth-generation Californian whose best known work, the multivolume *America and the California Dream*, chronicles the state’s history from 1850 to 2003.

The seven-book series looks beyond California’s material progress to examine the state’s cultural development. “The books add to California’s inner history, the history of imagination in California,” says Starr. Starr’s books follow the progress of the state at pivotal moments in California: the Gold Rush of the nineteenth century, the dynamic development of Los Angeles in the 1920s, the struggles during the Great Depression, and the diversification of the population today. Looking at these moments in the context of Californian culture, Starr says, helps our understanding of the state’s history.

“California is a very important part of the American formula,” continues Starr, who received his Ph.D. in American literature from Harvard University. “I had been exposed to American materials at Harvard, and I wanted to see how California fit in. For the past thirty-five years, I’ve been trying to find out.”

Starr’s investigations have led him to several careers—historian, journalist, professor, and librarian. He held the title of California State Librarian between 1994 and 2004, and is currently University Professor at the University of Southern California and contributing editor to the *Los Angeles Times*. “All knowledge, ultimately, is interrelated, and we search for a kind of coherence with the help of the humanities,” says Starr. “We don’t necessarily find it all the time, but the humanities point the way.”