



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

Remarks by Jamsheed K. Choksy

“Briefing on the Humanities in the 21st Century: Addressing National Security & Other Global Challenges Through Cultural Understanding”

U.S. Capitol Visitors Center

May 19, 2011

To engage on the world stage, be it in current political traumas or long-term transformational trajectories, understanding the cultural bases of foreign societies is critical. People in diverse regions of the world ground their actions and reactions on customs, faiths, histories, philosophies, and sometimes even myths which Americans need to know in order to mitigate conflict, generate cooperation, and enhance socioeconomic growth at home and abroad. We are all interconnected, and our values and beliefs can create common ground to avoid, whenever possible, “the path of blood and pain” which medieval Persian poets like ÔAttar and Rumi lamented in the 13th century.

Humanities research and education play vibrant and vital roles in assisting the United States, its departments, officers, and citizens to determine, comprehend, analyze, and respond appropriately to national security and other global challenges. Practitioners of the humanities do so through study and dissemination of knowledge on foreign languages, religions, histories, politics, and societies. Federal and state agencies, universities, and scholars involved in the humanities take contributing positively to national security and other international challenges earnestly. Likewise, Federal funding has and should continue to not merely sustain but invigorate scholarship in the humanities so that new avenues can be chartered which benefit American society generally and U.S. decision-making specifically.

In a free society like ours, university-based research centers and their faculty interact constantly with private think-tanks and government agencies. Moreover, the flow of scholars between universities and the government is a hallmark of the American political system. Those interactions facilitate transmission of knowledge from academic settings to decision-making and policy-implementation settings, while carrying back to academia the concerns and needs of diplomats, generals, and advisors.

I learned the many languages necessary for my chosen geographical areas of study, namely the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, for the most part as an undergraduate at Columbia University and subsequently as a graduate student at Harvard University. Faculty with experience garnered through years of research and teaching generously shared their intellectual resources and pedagogical skills with me. Education in the humanities – including the great books of both the West and the East – combined

with immersion in the cultures of countries like Iran and Pakistan through both classwork and fieldwork to prepare me for better understanding much-troubled societies.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), a Federal agency on whose oversight board – namely, the National Council on the Humanities – I have the privilege of serving, has a well-established track record of funding research projects whose findings contribute directly and indirectly to preparing Americans for the challenges of a complex world. In so doing, the NEH facilitates an integration of humanistic knowledge with the practical necessities of our great nation's national and international commitments.

Iran has held the United States' attention and vexed our leaders since the Islamic Revolution there in 1979. The most comprehensive collection of knowledge on Iran's present and past conditions is the Encyclopedia Iranica being compiled at Columbia University. This multi-year ongoing project, whose data are now available online, is an international scholarly undertaking supported in part by American taxpayers through grants from the NEH.

The Arab Spring or popular uprisings that have gripped countries from Libya to Yemen are largely fueled not by Islamic fundamentalism but by desires for representative governance, mitigation of corruption, and economic opportunities. Last year the NEH provided financial subvention, through its peer-reviewed grant process, for the production of a public radio series by America Abroad Media which examines the Arab world's demographic dilemma of restless youth who face both unemployment and disenfranchisement – a most timely project indeed.

Attempts by pariah regimes from Tehran to Pyongyang to procure uranium for nuclear programs have gained considerable attention from U.S. administrations in recent years. The African continent supplied between 25 to 50 percent of the world's radioactive ore during the past six decades. A field study at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, funded by the NEH in 2009, examines not only the history of uranium production in Africa but also how nations there utilize mineral resources to position themselves within global technological circles.

Not only is China the world's most populous nation, its economy has now taken the number- two spot after the United States. Chinese political expansion into the Indian Ocean and across the Asian and African continents is picking up steam too. Since 2004, the NEH has materially supported the China Biographical Database compiled by Harvard University's East Asian specialists. Bridging regional rivalries, the project involves scholars from Beijing University and Taiwan's Academia Sinica. So both valuable knowledge and cultural connections are being generated.

Newspapers are among the best and often the only primary sources of information for events in developing nations. Even texting and tweeting have not yet eclipsed newspapers. So, in 2007, the NEH began funding preservation and access to Latin American newspapers at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago. As a result, the contents of those publications can now be examined by security experts, scholars, and students alike to determine the trajectories of political, social, and other developments from multiple authorial perspectives.

At Indiana University's (IU) Bloomington campus, where I have taught for the past 17 years, bachelors-level students can choose from 82 languages to match their educational needs with professional

trajectories. The opportunities available for acquiring linguistic proficiency range from Mongolian to Somali. Indeed, all 16 most critical languages in the Department of Defense Strategic Language List (SLL) are taught at Indiana University.

Indiana University is home to 10 U.S. Department of Education Title VI-funded language and regional studies centers – including those for African studies, Islamic studies, and Latin American and Caribbean studies. In addition, IU has seven National Resource Centers (NRC) specializing in research on critical issues and areas – such as the Center for the Study of Global Change, the Inner Asian and Uralic NRC, and the Russian and East European Institute. Students intent on pursuing careers in the U.S. government and non-governmental organizations receive Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) funding through those NRCs.

The United States recognized, through the inhumane events of 9/11, that knowledge of lesser-known cultures and languages is absolutely necessary to successfully implement foreign policy and strategic interventions. So the Indiana Complex Operations Partnership (InCOP) between the National Guard and Indiana University began training Second Lieutenants in foreign languages and cultures. InCOP's Contextualized Intensive Language Program (CILP) involves three months of study in either the Pashto or Dari languages while engaging in Afghan role plays and societal encounters. Twenty-five students participated in the pilot program, with approximately two-thirds of them achieving elementary proficiency (reading and/or listening) on the Defense Language Aptitude Test. I am told that most of those brave young men and women are now in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) military theater.

However, academic and policy stove pipes do not always align so productively. Between 1984 and 1991, while conducting anthropological and archeological fieldwork in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, I observed the proliferation of Baloch and Pashtun madrasas. Drawings, by young impressionable students, on the walls of those elementary and secondary schools (so these are actually maktabas) equated Soviets and Russians killing Afghan families between 1979 and 1988 to Americans and Israelis fighting Palestinian civilians. I saw similar images at schools in Kota Bharu on the northeastern shore of Malaysia during a dissertation workshop co-sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) during the summer of 1990.

The humanities education I had received made me realize that although we shared the goals of life and liberty, my American understanding of the pursuit of happiness was very different from that which school children in Pakistan and Malaysia were gaining within militant institutions. I knew then, as did some of my colleagues and professors, that the diversity and tolerance enjoyed in the U.S. would not be brooked by fundamentalist societies developing elsewhere. Yet, to the extent I could ascertain through my professors, Washington was not particularly concerned at that time.

Nearly a decade later, in 1999-2000, a Hoosier graduate student of mine conducted fieldwork on education in AfPak settings as a National Security Education Program (NSEP)-Boren Fellow. His training in the religions, cultures, and languages of the Middle East, West Asia, and South Asia eventually led to a career overseeing the Department of Labor's reconstruction efforts in Iraq, directing the civil society division at the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), and running USAID subcontracted projects in South Waziristan and Yemen. But, prior to Al-Qaeda's September 2001 attacks, no policy journals were interested in the results of his graduate fieldwork on how militant Islamist ideology had penetrated school textbooks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Once calamity was

upon our nation, a summary of his investigations quickly found print as an article under the title “‘A’ is for Allah, ‘J’ is for Jihad” (Craig Davis, World Policy Journal, vol. 19, Spring 2002).

The lessons for us are obvious in hindsight. Yet the types of observations that only come from studying other cultures closely, from learning about their pasts and presents, from analyzing and contextualizing their ideas and practices, must be given much greater credence as a routine aspect of American foreign policy. There is no substitute for being there in person when studying the developing world, for fieldwork is an intrinsic part of the humanities.

Education in medieval Europe began with the trivium, a Latin word related to English “trivial,” or humanistic learning regarded so “basic” as to be indispensable. The trivium comprised three modes of knowledge: grammar or the structure of language; logic or the systematic use of thought and analysis; and rhetoric or the application of both language and logic to instruct, assuage, and persuade. In our current struggles with Iran’s theocracy it is worthwhile to keep in mind that the trivium still forms the basis of Shiite clerical education, having been assimilated by Muslim scholars from Greece, Rome, and ancient or pre-Islamic Iran.

Political and religious differences notwithstanding, the humanities can provide a vehicle for and a measure of understanding between seemingly disparate cultures whose leaders and members may envision different world orders. Indeed contact and assessment, are two meanings of the Indo-European word *wegh-* from which both trivium and trivial plus the notion of weighing derive.

During the 20th and 21st centuries, humanities funding has become so trivial, to use the term in its common parlance of “insignificant,” in actual dollar amounts compared to entitlements and defense, that it is easy to overlook the national value derived and equally easy to decrease its funding. Yet, like a physical garden in which herbicides are a retroactive means of control whereas appropriate nutrients are a proactive one, knowledge remains key to tending societal issues before problems develop and to mitigating crises when they occur.

Humanities form the wellspring of knowledge, necessary in good times and in bad times, for making friends and influencing people, even for eliminating foes. So the humanities and its international focuses must remain integral, indispensable, parts of the U.S. educational and foreign policy systems in order for Americans to surmount global challenges that lie ahead. Shared funding of humanities research by the Federal government – through agencies like the NEH – and state and private academic institutions can provide pathways for meeting national security and cross-cultural challenges in a constantly changing world.

[Back](#)