



ACTA
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“The Obligations of Citizenship”

By Professor Robert David Johnson

Remarks accepting

**The Philip Merrill Award
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education**

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The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability. Launched in 1995, ACTA has a national network of alumni and trustees from more than 700 colleges and universities, including 9,000 current board members.

“The Obligations of Citizenship”

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We live in an extraordinary era in the history of American higher education. Excepting a brief period at the high point of McCarthyism, ours is the only time in which a majority of the humanities and social sciences professoriate has successfully limited the range of acceptable research questions on the nation’s college campuses. The result has been an academy too often characterized by ideologically and pedagogically one-sided course offerings; extraneous litmus tests in the personnel process; and extremist articulations of shared assumptions on issues of race, class, and gender.

In recent years, of course, the highest-profile example of these developments has been the Duke lacrosse case. Dozens of faculty members, sensing an opportunity to advance their common socio-political agenda, patently disregarded some of the most cherished principles of our legal system by labeling a group of students guilty because of their race, class, gender, and status in intercollegiate athletics. These same professors then unrepentantly defended their massive violations of due process as the case to which they had attached their reputations imploded.

Some structural features of public institutions make academic group-think a particularly intractable problem on their campuses. Faculty unions have their greatest influence in public colleges

and universities, making it easy for them to develop professorial constituencies that find intellectual conformity altogether congenial. To take two examples: Cary Nelson—president of the nation’s most prominent faculty bargaining agent, the American Association of University Professors—recently asserted that in the hiring process, departments may consider a candidate’s political beliefs, including positions that fall well within the realm of mainstream discourse in the country as a whole. And at CUNY, the faculty union’s research-weak leadership has spent a decade alternating between denouncing Israeli national security policy and condemning virtually all of Chancellor Matthew Goldstein’s initiatives to improve standards at the University.²

Meanwhile, heavier teaching loads, coupled with unreliable state financial support, can tempt public humanities and social sciences units to brand themselves “teaching departments”—as if no connection exists between the new knowledge generated by research and enhancing classroom instruction. Indeed, the phrase itself—“teaching department”—too often rationalizes personnel decisions characterized by blind acceptance of the majority’s pedagogical agenda, celebration of “diversity” as the preeminent goal in hiring, and bland statements about delivering a “21st century education.”³

Unlike their private counterparts, many public institutions trace their heritage to 19th century land grant legislation, which established a connection between education and the health of American democracy. Most others still rely, to varying degrees, on legislative funding, and so have an incentive to frame their missions as consistent with creating an informed, democratic citizenry.⁴ And since the overwhelming majority of immigrants and first-generation college students attend public institutions, these goals also trimmed according to the perceived needs of these constituencies that politicians and the electorate define.

Exactly how universities should train engaged U.S. citizens is, justifiably, the subject of vigorous debate. But I suspect that nearly all legislators, newspaper editorialists, alumni, and parents would consider essential such items as: exposing students to the foundations of Western civilization; ensuring that students enjoy the right to civil debate about contentious issues; and instructing students in the history and traditions of their own government by scholars trained in the topic.

How have public colleges and universities delivered on their oft-stated promise to produce—quoting SUNY-Albany’s mission statement—“literate, informed, and compassionate citizens . . . capable of thinking for themselves, of advancing the condition of their fellow Americans, and of enjoying to the fullest the intellectual, spiritual, and material benefits of democracy”?⁵

Through its report on “The Vanishing Shakespeare,” ACTA demonstrated how English departments have replaced required courses on Shakespeare with offerings on critical theory and “body studies.”⁶ A glance through the website of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education reveals that despite the First Amendment, public colleges and universities too often have joined their private counterparts in such Orwellian re-education efforts as the University of Delaware’s now-aborted scheme to provide “treatment” for students whose beliefs residence life administrators deemed inappropriate.⁷

Regarding U.S. history: in the last generation, growing numbers of colleges and universities have made it unlikely or even impossible for students who wish to learn more about the history of American politics, the Constitution, the U.S. military, or the past interactions of the United States with the international community to take courses from professors who are trained in these fields. Moreover, the past decade has featured aggressive schemes to “re-vision” U.S. political

and diplomatic history around themes of race, class, and gender—pedagogical approaches that already dominate most contemporary humanities and social sciences departments.⁸

To take one example, at the University of Michigan—which promises to develop “leaders and *citizens* [emphasis added] who will challenge the present and enrich the future” and which *U.S. News & World Report* identifies as among the nation’s ten top places to study U.S. history—currently has 32 full-time department members teaching the national period of U.S. history.⁹ Yet of that total, only one works on U.S. diplomatic history, one on legal history, and two publish on topics in political history. (None are military historians.) By contrast, the department has 11 professors who examine race in America and eight specialists in U.S. women’s history.¹⁰ The clear message: students—or, in the university’s language, future “leaders and citizens”—who desire exposure to an array of professors trained in U.S. political, diplomatic, constitutional, or military history should either enroll elsewhere or confine themselves to an interpretation of American history through the lens of the race/class/gender trinity.

Questioning universities (public or private) about personnel or curricular matters usually generates a demand to butt out. During the controversy over improper classroom behavior by some of Columbia’s Middle East Studies professors, more than 100 Columbia faculty members endorsed a letter urging President Lee Bollinger to defend the professors’ conduct, since some criticism had come from off campus (especially from Jacob Gershman’s superb reporting and Ira Stoll’s passionate editorials in the much-missed *New York Sun*). During the lacrosse case, one of the most prominent pitchfork-wielding faculty, Karla Holloway, similarly demanded that the Duke administration publicly support her against what she termed “unending streams of

blogged nonsense.” As at Columbia, Holloway justified her call on the basis of the criticism’s source, not its content. One hallmark of “21st century education,” it seems, is redefining academic freedom to mean the freedom of the academic majority from public criticism.

Even this perverted definition of academic freedom, however, cannot excuse public or private universities from disregarding a central element of their mission. If institutions actually believe they can train future citizens without exposing them to scholars reflecting a pedagogically diverse range of approaches to the American past, let them say so publicly.

At some universities, sadly, officials have made such a case. As a University of Texas professor and administrator recently informed his state’s legislature, “The name ‘Western Civilizations and American [Traditions]’ sounds really right-wing.”¹¹ The administrator made no attempt to reconcile this assertion with the university’s stated commitment to “advance a free society” and to prepare “educated, productive citizens” through programs that “enrich and expand the appreciation and preservation of our civilization.”¹²

Only in the contemporary academy could trained faculty members teaching in a program about “American traditions” be considered “really right-wing.” Of course, the definition of “right-wing” in higher education would be unrecognizable anyplace else. I speak from personal experience: I’m a Democrat who was an early, public supporter of Barack Obama. And I have been (again publicly) to the left of the President on some issues, such as equality in civil marriage, most recently regarding the President’s cowardice in not condemning Question One in my home state, Maine. Yet I have lost track of how many times I have been described as “right-wing” by academic critics.

In the end, ensuring that colleges and universities provide students with a full range of instruction about the country in which they live is

neither left-wing nor right-wing, neither Democratic nor Republican. Unfortunately, this obligation of citizenship is recognized by too few public institutions—even as they owe their existence to the public and have promised to train citizens in response. Because of ACTA’s leadership on this issue, I am particularly honored to receive the 2009 Merrill Award.

Endnotes

1. My thanks to Paula Sutter Fichtner, David Berger, Margaret King, Steve Remy, and two additional readers for their helpful comments.
2. http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2009/09/the_aaup_dismisses_academic_fr.html, accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
3. For the most consistent reflection of this conception of what a “21st century education” means, see the initiatives of the Association of American Colleges & Universities.
4. For a sampling of these sentiments, from the mission statements of a cross-section of public colleges and universities around the country: the University of Washington promises to foster “engaged and responsible citizenship as part of the learning experience of our students, faculty, and staff.” (<http://www.washington.edu/discovery/>, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); Kansas State University: “prepares its students to be informed, productive, and responsible citizens who participate actively in advancing cultural, educational, economic, scientific, and socio-political undertakings.” (<http://www.k-state.edu/provost/planning/mission.html>, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); Auburn University: “emphasizes a broad and superior undergraduate education that imparts the knowledge, skills, and values so essential to educated and responsible citizens.” (http://www.auburn.edu/administration/trustees/policymanual/vision_and_mission.html, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); Recognizing “that knowledge is the fundamental wealth of civilization,” the University of Oregon “strives to enrich the public that sustains it through the cultivation of an attitude toward citizenship that fosters . . . the wise exercise of civic responsibilities and individual judgment throughout life.” (<http://www.uoregon.edu/~uosenate/UOmissionstatement.html>, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); University of Montana: “seeks to educate competent and humane professionals and

informed, ethical, and engaged citizens.” <http://www.umt.edu/president/mission.aspx>, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); Virginia Tech: understands “the key role the university plays in the development of productive citizens.” (http://www.president.vt.edu/mission_vision/mission.html, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); University of Maryland-Eastern Shore promises “the education of citizens for life in the American economy” and “the development of leaders who are sensitive to the role America plays in shaping the national and international agendas.” (<http://www.umes.edu/About/Default.aspx?id=238>, accessed 10 Aug. 2009.); University of New Mexico: to “provide students the values, habits of mind, knowledge, and skills that they need to be enlightened citizens, to contribute to the state and national economies, and to lead satisfying lives.” (<http://www.unm.edu/~acadaffr/MissionStatement.html>, accessed 10 Aug. 2009); University of Maine: “Through teaching, basic and applied research, and public service activities, the University of Maine contributes to the economic, social and cultural life of Maine citizens.” (<http://www.umaine.edu/about/mission.htm>); University of Nebraska: “UNL provides for the people of the state unique opportunities to fulfill their highest ambitions and aspirations, thereby helping the state retain its most talented youth, attract talented young people from elsewhere, and address the educational needs of the nontraditional learner.” (<http://www.unl.edu/ucomm/aboutunl/roleandmission.shtml>); Penn State University: “As Pennsylvania’s land-grant university, we also hold a unique responsibility to provide access, outreach, and public service to support the citizens of the Commonwealth and beyond.” (<http://www.psu.edu/ur/about/mission.html>); University of Utah: “the University of Utah fosters reflection on the values and goals of society.” (<http://www.admin.utah.edu/president/mission.html>); University of Memphis: “The transfer and dissemination of knowledge with community stakeholders for the intellectual, economic, and social advancement of our community.” (<http://www2.memphis.edu/presweb/plan/values.html>); University of Alabama: “To advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the State through quality programs of teaching, research, and service.” (<http://www.ua.edu/mission.html>); East Carolina University: “The university also is committed to imparting a sense of citizenship and personal responsibility, fostering lifelong learning, and nurturing an understanding of the interdependencies of people and their environments.” (<http://www.ecu.edu/ecu/ecumission.cfm>); West Virginia: “WVU’s special responsibility is to seek out, challenge, educate, and help create opportunities for those West Virginia citizens who can

benefit from its programs, especially those who have demonstrated high achievement or who possess excellent potential.” (<http://wvuhistory.wvu.edu/mission>); UMass-Boston: a promise to “bring the intellectual, technical, and human resources of the university community to bear on the economic and social needs of metropolitan regions -- for example, through public policy analysis and applied problem solving in areas such as environmental quality, city planning, tax policy, the schools, and economic development.” (<http://www.umb.edu/about/mission.html>); Colorado State: “Inspired by its land-grant heritage, Colorado State University is committed to excellence, setting the standard for public research universities in teaching, research, service and extension for the benefit of the citizens of Colorado, the United States, and the world.” (<http://www.colostate.edu/mission.aspx>).

5. http://www.albany.edu/ir/msche/docs/UA_mission_1992.pdf, accessed 10 Aug. 2009.
6. *The Vanishing Shakespeare: A Report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni* (Washington, DC: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007).
7. <http://www.thefire.org/index.php/article/8555.html>, accessed 1 Sept. 2009.
8. For a summary, see Robert David Johnson, “Intellectual Diversity and the Teaching of U.S. History,” U.S. Senate, Education and Labor Committee, 118th Congress, 1st session, Hearings, *Is Intellectual Diversity an Endangered Species on Today’s College Campuses?*, 2003.
9. <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/history/>, accessed 10 May 2009; <http://www.umich.edu/pres/mission.html>, accessed 10 May 2009.
10. <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/history/facstaff/default.asp>, accessed 10 May 2009.
11. *Daily Texan*, 9 April 2009.
12. <http://www.utsystem.edu/osm/mission.htm>, accessed 1 Sept. 2009.

The following are written tributes prepared in conjunction with the presentation of the 2009 Philip Merrill Award to Professor Robert David “KC” Johnson.

Paula Sutter Fichtner

Professor of History Emerita, Brooklyn College

KC Johnson came to Brooklyn College in the fall of 1999 with a publication record that already outstripped résumés of many historians twice his age. Hired as an Americanist, he had been trained at Harvard in political history, including the politics and diplomacy of foreign affairs. He was also prepared to teach constitutional and legal history, fields that he quickly, though sadly, realized he had to know a lot more about to survive professionally.

Johnson has become a full-blown institutional historian; “institution” as a term appears in several permutations throughout the introduction to his book *Congress and the Cold War*.¹ His fundamental and passionately held commitment, indeed his passion, has been to further the understanding of American political and legal institutions such as Congress, the presidency, political parties, the Supreme Court, and the Constitution, particularly in the twentieth century. Once cornerstones of programs in American history, these topics had been falling out of fashion some time before KC arrived on the Brooklyn College scene; we appointed him in part because our department had not yet fully assimilated curricular changes taking place elsewhere, but chiefly because he was so very good at what he did. Even professing radicals respected him.

On those grounds alone, ACTA, the Merrill Award, and KC were made for one another. His approach to history is compatible with ACTA’s purposes as well. He draws conclusions only after meticulous examination of available evidence. He is rigorously critical, both of his material and himself as he decides on what it is saying as opposed to

what he hoped it would say. He does not substitute personal opinion for fact, even when those facts run counter to his own political wish-list, which is extensive. He refused to trim his scholarship to political and/or socio-economic agendas, however much he might want to advance some of these policies. If he proselytizes, it is for the intrinsic importance of his subject matter and the way he studies it. Most important of all: KC's many students at all levels respect and admire the way he does history. The majority of undergraduates at Brooklyn College are lamentably ignorant of American legal and political institutions, thanks to the dwindling role of these matters in high school curricula. Nevertheless, KC's audiences have apparently intuited that it was Lyndon Johnson as president that made Lyndon Johnson the man historically interesting enough for KC to write a book called *All the Way with LBJ: the 1964 Presidential Election* (2009).²

KC's involvement with political and legal institutions, however, has extended far beyond the archives, libraries, and classrooms where he holds forth in his day job. His disputed tenure/promotion case at Brooklyn College that made him headline-worthy, at least for a while, was a sobering example of how crucial institutions and their management can be in the lives of us all. The October [American Council of Trustees and Alumni] *Inside Academe* summarizes how he got into trouble: his critique of politically one-sided academic forums that students were urged to forego classes and attend; his steadfast opposition, as a member of a department appointments committee, to a marginally qualified candidate for an assistant professorship; and, last though not least, for his existential fate as a white male specializing in a branch of American history that men of many pigments had historically dominated, both for good and for ill. The exact proportions of ideology, personal animus and professional insecurity and rivalry that gave rise to this situation will probably never be determined. But what it produced was a flagrant episode of institutional failure: failure of college officials

from the top down who were in a position to intervene but did not; the failure of a faculty union that was authorized to defend members against abuses of administrative authority but did not, and the peculiarities of the Brooklyn College governance structure that allowed department chairs collectively to worry more about group solidarity than intellectual quality and achievement. It was, to reach into history for a moment, the kind of corporate corruption described in 1748 by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* in which those who govern lose sight of the fundamental principles of the system they are empowered to serve. In Johnson's case, it was academic authorities who for a variety of reasons forgot that the first principle of the university is the pursuit and transmission of knowledge by men and women whose minds, training, and character best fit them to do it.

KC had vocal and steady supporters at Brooklyn College, who stood behind him at the cost of precious time and long friendships. Several students worked passionately for his cause. A few new hires in the history department put their chances of tenure on the line when they rallied behind him. Coverage in the public media was also helpful in the early stages of the dispute. But it took another institution, the central administration of the City University of New York and its Board of Trustees, to rectify the systemic melt-down of governance at Brooklyn College. Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, his doggedly thorough legal adviser, Rick Schaffer, and the Board were deeply troubled by the procedural violations in the Johnson case, some of which were so gross that a lawsuit that KC and an attorney were preparing would have clearly prevailed in court. But both Board and chancellor were also committed to building a first-class faculty that exemplified American higher education at its best, and Johnson was a serious property. It was therefore the highest authority in the City University of New York to use its constituted powers to restore the first principles of the academic profession to Brooklyn College. The entire episode was compelling proof that

competent authorities must understand and be alert to the principles of the institutions for which they are responsible and that civil organizations such as ACTA thrive in order to sound the alarm when chancellors, presidents, provosts, deans, department chairs and faculty agents forget what it is that they are supposed to do. Without ACTA and the persistence of those who share its goals, KC would have been before us this evening as one more victim of institutional structures gone very wrong rather than as an academic success story.

1. Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge, 2006).
2. ----. *All the Way with LBJ: the 1964 Presidential Election* (New York: Cambridge, 2009).

Margaret L. King

Professor of History, Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York

I am KC's officemate: the disorder and the window are his, the worn-out rug and curtain are mine, in an office little occupied, as neither of us rejoices to be physically lodged in the same space where the terrible events of 2000-2002 unfolded when the department of history at Brooklyn College came together to oppose the tenure and promotion of this wonderful scholar. Since then, he has written or edited several books, many articles, and thousands and thousands of words in blogs and op-eds, while he continues to attract and inspire the best of our students. And he has continued to fight.

There were three main struggles, in each of which KC enunciated a key principle. The first was the tenure battle itself, which centered on the issue of "collegiality"; an innocuous enough issue on the surface—who wants to work in an atmosphere dulled by surliness and resentment?—but in this case, and in many others around the

country, a ploy by which to isolate and exclude those who are not ideologically acceptable to the majority. The second was the battle over the imposition of leftist ideology in the school of education, in which KC defended students targeted by a professor who used for a weapon the notion of “disposition”: students who did not agree with her approach were identified as not having the proper “disposition” to teach. The third, which gained national attention, was the battle at Duke, where oafish members of the lacrosse team were falsely accused of rape complicated by racism, publicly denounced, disowned by the university, and very nearly condemned in court, though no rape had occurred, on a charge that was nothing more than a nasty fantasy fueled by perverse ambitions and ideological assumptions. Here the principle violated was that fundamental one of the assumption of innocence; violated by the very agents of the law and the university who should most have cherished it.

These are all in the past. I want to close by asking KC to set aside his scholarly commitments one more time to write another book, because no one else is out there who knows the subject as KC does from the inside and who has the energy, persistence, and gifts of mind to pursue it. The book I envision is on the radicalization of the university curriculum: the hiring practices of the last few decades that have put in place a radical faculty that now controls academic departments throughout the nation and is intent upon replicating itself for years to come; the remaking of the curriculum so as to remove from sight those academic subjects that do not serve a radical agenda; the proliferation of extra-departmental programs and institutes where this agenda can be pursued covertly and undetected; and the bizarre alliances between administrators and faculty in the service of a radicalized university. KC, we need you to do this; take this on.

Professor Robert David “KC” Johnson



A professor of history at Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Dr. KC Johnson is a recognized scholar of American political and diplomatic history and a leading commentator on current trends in academic life. Educated at Harvard and the University of Chicago, he is a passionate advocate for the study of American institutions, principles, and values and an articulate

spokesman for why the politically correct university is undermining America's ability to understand and sustain itself as a nation.

Professor Johnson played a key role during the Duke lacrosse case. His blog, “Durham-in-Wonderland,” provided information about the state of the case, and brought to light the deep bias of the Duke faculty and the unwillingness of the administration to stand for due process. He is co-author, with Stuart Taylor, Jr., of *Until Proven Innocent: Political Correctness and the Shameful Injustice of the Duke Lacrosse Case*, the definitive work on the incident.

Dr. Johnson is also known for the circumstances under which he was granted tenure. Despite strongly favorable reviews and an accomplished record in both publishing and teaching, his initial application for tenure was declined on grounds of an alleged lack of “collegiality”—which is to say he stood up for high academic standards and intellectual pluralism even when others wished he would remain silent. After an extensive battle, during which many prominent professors weighed in on his behalf, he was awarded tenure on appeal from the CUNY chancellor, with the support of the Board of Trustees.

In addition to inspiring students at Brooklyn, Professor Johnson was Fulbright Distinguished Chair in the Humanities at Tel Aviv University in 2007-2008. He has written several books focusing on 20th Century American history, including *All the Way with LBJ: The 1964 Presidential Election, Congress and the Cold War*, and *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations*. He is also co-editor of *The Presidential Recordings: Lyndon B. Johnson*, vols. 2 and 3.

The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education



ACTA is most pleased to be presenting the fifth annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. The awarding of this prize, made on the recommendation of a distinguished selection committee, advances ACTA's long-term initiative to promote and encourage a strong

liberal arts education.

The Merrill Award offers a unique tribute to those dedicated to the transmission of the great ideas and central values of our civilization and is presented to inspire others and provide public acknowledgment of the value of their endeavors. Past recipients of the award are Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and founder and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University (2005); Harvey C. Mansfield, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University (2006); Gertrude Himmelfarb, professor emeritus of history at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (2007); and Donald Kagan, Sterling Professor of Classics and History at Yale University (2008).

The prize is named in honor of Philip Merrill, who served as a trustee of Cornell University, the University of Maryland Foundation, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, the Aspen Institute and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Mr. Merrill was also a founding member of ACTA's National Council.



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