Welcome and Introduction

Robert McCaughey: I want to thank you all for coming, particularly on a wet, rainy, and very un-spring-like evening. This is the second of four conversations about Columbia, about Columbia's history, by . . . in most cases by Columbia historians, at least many of us so employed. This is the second of four such conversations. Last week Kenneth Jackson spoke on the connection, often strained, between the City of New York and Columbia University. And the respondents to his talk . . . from Mike Wallace, from the John Jay School of Criminal Justice, and Evan Cornog, associate dean of the School of Journalism. That talk . . . while we hope that you here tonight who were not there last night, will . . . Like readers of Jane Austen, Patrick O'Brien novels, or The Sopranos series on television, once you've read or seen one you have to go back for the others. Ken's talk and the comments will be on audio and videotape on the Columbia 250 Web site tomorrow morning, as will these talks in seriatim.

Next Wednesday Rosalind Rosenberg, professor of history at Barnard College, will be giving the third talk, "Beyond the Knickerbockers: Inclusive Columbia." There is not a question mark there, but I think the intent of her talk is to question that inclusivity. She will be joined as respondents by Gillian Lindt, who has served in an administrative capacity here at Columbia as dean of the graduate school, but was for many years professor of religion and the sociology of religion in the religion department; and Monica Miller, an assistant professor of English at Barnard, and assistant professor of Pan-African studies.
The fourth and final presentation will be a talk by me called "Columbia '68: A Chapter in the History of Student Power." And the respondents that evening will be Ted de Bary, University provost, John Mitchell Mason Professor Emeritus, and an active faculty member in the 1960s. Also Lewis Cole, professor of theater in the School of the Arts here at Columbia now, and in 1968 one of the leaders of SDS. And Jacqueline Russo, who was I think 12 years from being born at the time, a member of the Columbia class of 2004, a student university senator.

Tonight's talk: "Columbia at Midcentury: The Intellectual Capital of the Nation?"—question mark. Before introducing the main speaker, though, I'd like to introduce the two respondents. Fritz Stern, University professor emeritus since 1997, Columbia College 1956, PhD here 1953, professor of history since 1963, the author of many important books: *The Politics of Cultural Despair, Varieties of History, Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire*, in 1977—which won the Lionel Trilling Award of the best book published by a Columbia member of the faculty—and more recently *Einstein's German World*. Fritz was a student, friend, and neighbor on Claremont Avenue of many of the luminaries of the 1950s here at Columbia.

And Casey Blake—professor of history and chair of the American Studies Program—did his undergraduate training at Wesleyan and then his PhD at the University of Rochester, has taught at Indiana University and Washington University in St. Louis, and is the author of *Beloved Community: the Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne*. This is not in the title, but I put it in parentheses, Columbia College, 1912. Then with Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Louie Mumford. Underway is a book on public art and the civic imagination in contemporary America.

Our main speaker is Alan Brinkley, historian of twentieth-century America. His BA was from Princeton in 1971, and his doctorate from Harvard in 1977. He's the author of *Voices of Protest, Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*, which in 1981 won the National Book Award . . . came to Columbia in 1991. Alan is in some ways the Roger Clemens of academe; whereas Clemens won pitching awards both for the Red Sox and the Yankees, I think Alan is one of the few individuals, in this century at least, to have won teaching awards successively at Harvard and then, coming to the big leagues, at Columbia University.

His talk tonight is very much in the interrogative: "Columbia at Midcentury: The Intellectual Capital of the World?" Alan Brinkley.
Alan Brinkley: Columbia at Midcentury

Alan Brinkley: Well, I too want to thank you all for coming out on this dreary night. And I want to thank Bob for organizing this series of lectures, which are an important part of Columbia's observance of its own 250th anniversary. I am the nominal host of this series of lectures, and I suppose I'm abusing my position as host by imposing myself on you tonight. I want to thank as well Fritz Stern, who—Bob didn't mention among his many, many achievements in life, if achievement this can be called—is a former provost, and so one of several members of my department who've served in that capacity in the last thirty, forty years. So I want to thank Fritz for coming. I want to thank Casey for coming. I want to acknowledge, before they are asked to comment on my remarks, that they will be hearing this talk for the first time just as you are, so I absolve them of any responsibility for responding in the informed way on what I'm about to say.

I agree with Bob that Columbia's history is something that has not really—until Bob wrote his wonderful book this year—has not received very much attention from Columbians. And this may be a reflection of our reticence about ourselves. It may be a reflection of the fact that historians who reside in universities have on the whole taken very little interest in the history of universities generally. So this is a welcome opportunity to reflect on our own past, and on some of the ways in which it's affected our present.

And so I propose to do this by looking back at Columbia in the roughly two decades after World War II. And looking at Columbia in those years—years that I think most observers of the academic world would agree were years of extraordinary intellectual distinction—it's sometimes difficult to understand how the University was as successful at it was in those years. It's actually a question that could be asked about many periods in Columbia's history. The reason was certainly not efficient and enlightened and charismatic administration. The period began with an extended period in which no successor to Nicholas Murray Butler, the president for 44 years, was named, and in which a weak-acting president presided. It continued with the unhappy Columbia presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was present on campus for a substantial part of only one year of his nearly four-year presidency. And then succeeding Eisenhower was Grayson Kirk, a somewhat aloof, conflict-averse leader who managed and delegated more than he led and, of course, whose presidency ended disastrously in the wreckage of 1968. An ironic end for a conflict-averse president.

Nor was the reason for Columbia's distinction its wealth. Columbia in the 1950s and 1960s was already falling far behind its principal competitors in resources, and was
earning a distinction that it still holds of being among the two or three tuition-dependent universities among America's great universities.

Columbia's distinction then, as I believe it is still, came from the energy and the imagination and the brilliance of its faculty and students, and its success in attracting not only great scholars but also major public intellectuals. Was Columbia the intellectual capital of the nation in those years? That's the question that's a part of the title of my talk. The answer to that, of course, depends on what you think the most important intellectual currents were in the United States in midcentury, but Columbia was certainly among a small number of institutions whose intellectual life left a deep and lasting mark on the nation's culture. And I want to talk about two kinds of intellectual life at the University in those years, and two groups of people—faculty and students—whose impact on Columbia and on the scholarly and cultural life of the nation was, I believe, profound.

I had been teaching for many years before I came to Columbia, teaching courses on modern American history, including courses on the period that I'm discussing tonight. And it wasn't until I arrived at Columbia that it occurred to me how much of what I'd been discussing in my courses on American intellectual life in the 1950s was focused on people who had been at Columbia in that time. So tonight I'm fully aware of that feature of this period.

**Cosmopolitanism**

One of these groups, one of the cultural stances that I want to talk about, and of the groups of scholars and intellectuals who promoted it, can perhaps best be approached through a conference that many of them attended in 1954 here at Columbia, a conference organized by the sociologist Daniel Bell, to consider the causes of the harsh anticommunism that was then exercising such a great and pernicious power in the nation. Among the participants in this conference, in addition to Bell himself, were Columbia professors Lionel Trilling and Robert Merton and Richard Neustadt and Richard Hofstadter and Nathan Glazer, and other prominent non-Columbia scholars. Bell, Hofstadter, and Glazer all contributed later to a volume entitled *The New American Right*, later revised and reissued under what's probably its now more familiar title, *The Radical Right*, which Bell had edited.

The significance of this conference is actually not so much in its content, or in the book that came out of it, than it is in the intellectual impulses that lay behind it. It was first an explicitly interdisciplinary exercise, an effort to make use of the perspectives of a number of different disciplines—history, literature, sociology, political science, psychology, and others—to help answer a significant social question. And this was one of the characteristics, I think, of Columbia's intellectual
life in the 1950s and 1960s, this heady idea that disciplines could cross-fertilize one another. And it's ironic for a university that was actually very late in creating interdisciplinary programs—formal interdisciplinary programs . . . so late that the first of them was created only a year or so before I arrived here—but not so surprising, I suppose, when one considers the Core Curriculum and the colloquium and all the many other curricular enterprises that are so dependent on an interdisciplinary frame of mind. So interdisciplinary inquiry was one of the things that this conference helped illuminate.

But it was also significant because it was part of an effort by a wide range of scholars in the 1950s, including preeminently perhaps some significant Columbia scholars, to define a vision of American society. And this conference contributed to creating such a vision, a vision to which a number of its participants had already made significant contributions. The concerns about McCarthyism expressed in this conference, and recorded in *The New American Right*, expressed a series of beliefs that became exceptionally influential in the academic and intellectual worlds for the next two decades and unusually closely associated with scholars at Columbia. Part of this vision was rooted in an idea of what America should be. These intellectuals were committed to a set of values that a number of historians have since described as cosmopolitanism, values that must have seemed particularly appealing to a group of people living in New York City in the 1950s. Cosmopolitanism was an essentially urban caste of mind, one that attributed particular importance to such worldly values as tolerance of diversity, a skeptical relativistic attitude towards inherited faiths, and above all, perhaps, an intensely rational caste of mind, a really profound belief in the possibility of rational inquiry to answer the most basic questions of society.

This cosmopolitan sensibility included, as well, particular scorn directed at what many considered its opposite, provincialism. The provincial world, they believed, embraced a narrowness of vision, fixed beliefs, intolerance of difference. Out of provincialism, they believed, had emerged such irrational outbursts of prejudice as McCarthyism and racism and anti-Semitism. And among the purposes they attributed to intellectual life was the elevation of the values of cosmopolitanism and the discrediting of the values of provincialism.

**Consensus Ideology and the Rational Tradition**

A second and related part of their vision of America was a description not of society as they hoped it might become, but of society as they believed it was. They've often been accused of being excessively celebratory in expressing this view, but in fact for most of them it was a harshly and almost resignedly critical view of American life, a description that became one of the most widely discussed intellectual developments of the postwar era. It became known rather late in its life as consensus ideology. It
earned that title when the great intellectual historian John Higham, who taught for many years at Johns Hopkins and died just last year, published a withering critique of this set of ideas in *Commentary* in 1959, which he entitled "The Cult of the 'American Consensus.'"

At the heart of the so-called consensus idea was an assumption about the core values of American culture as they existed, assumptions about what motivated Americans in the conduct of their lives and the pursuit of their goals. And what formed the core of American life, according to consensus theorists, was essentially material ambition. All Americans were at heart liberals and capitalists. What drove them, what motivated them, was a commitment to individual freedom, to the hope of individual economic advancement through capitalist success. The Harvard political theorist Louis Hartz is often credited with establishing this idea through the influence of his extraordinary book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, which argued that liberalism—which in his view was intimately tied to capitalism—was the only significant political tradition in American history. But Hartz, in writing this book, was building on earlier expressions of the consensus idea from, among others, the great Columbia historian Richard Hofstadter. In Hofstadter's extraordinarily durable and influential book *The American Political Tradition*—published in 1948, seven years before Hartz's book was published—he argued that historians and others misunderstood American society when they tried to explain it as a society based on high ideals and spiritual aspirations. And they misunderstood it as well when they tried to explain it—as historians in the recent past, such as the Columbia scholar Charles Beard, whose picture is on the cover of the program for this series . . . when they tried to explain it as Charles Beard had done in terms of a continuing conflict between different groups. This is what became known as progressive history, the idea that American history moved forward because of a continuing battle between the people and the interests, the have and the have-nots, the center and the periphery.

Hofstadter rejected this view. There were conflicts in American history, he conceded, but recognizing what divided various groups was less important than recognizing what Hofstadter called "the common climate of opinion" within which the conflicts occurred. He wrote in the introduction to his book, "However much at odds on specific issues, the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the virtues of capitalist culture, as necessary qualities of man." That, in effect, Hofstadter was implying, was what defined America: a common commitment to acquisitive individualism, to the main chance, to the economic virtues of capitalist culture. And to support this argument Hofstadter created a series of acerbic portraits of great American political figures—from the founding fathers, to Woodrow Wilson, and the two Roosevelts—portraits written with great elegance and economy, such elegance and economy that they became, to Hofstadter's great surprise, standard
reading in basic American history courses in college and even high schools, even though they had been written as a kind of subversive effort to undermine all of the assumptions that had led to the standard teaching of American history.

But what really marked Hofstadter's descriptions of the many political figures he described from—three different centuries, from multiple political parties—was the remarkable sameness in their underlying values and purposes. Generation after generation of political leaders set out using various styles and means, enjoying varying levels of success, but set out on a common task: to advance the great project of making America safe for individual material success. It would be too much perhaps to interpret Hofstadter as saying that every leader was the same, but he was certainly setting out to show that the similarities were more important than the differences. Even his jarring inclusion of Wendell Phillips, the impassioned abolitionist, in his panoply of great American figures was an effort to illustrate through contrast how little such passion existed in the normal patterns of American politics.

Hofstadter went on to write a series of other major interpretive works, all of which have had profound effects on American historiography and have won him a place as, I think, one of the greatest and most influential American historians of this century. In *The Age of Reform*, published in 1955, he wrote witheringly about the populist and progressive reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although he conceded that there was much intelligence and value in both these movements, his principal concern in examining them was to show how they substituted flabby nostalgia, and at times an impassioned bigotry, for rational arguments rooted in rational self-interest.

In his famous essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," published in 1964, he continued to draw an invidious distinction between those who based their politics on sentiment, passion, and prejudice and those who pursued a more rational and self-interested course. He wrote in that essay, "Although American political life has rarely been touched by the most acute varieties of class conflict, it has served again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds. I call this the 'paranoid style' simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind." Hofstadter and his fellow consensus scholars at Columbia and elsewhere did not particularly admire the values of self-interest they described. They considered acquisitive individualism an impoverished basis for an enlightened society, and they despaired at times at the ability of so materialistic a nation to produce a society or a culture of real moral worth. But they didn't deplore it too much. They might have preferred that America be dominated by their own cosmopolitan values, but they doubted that such values could ever reach very far beyond a relatively small elite.
Given that, the consensus idea was not really so troubling, partly because the alternatives—the realistic alternatives—always seemed to them so much worse. The American liberal tradition, built around the values of competitive capitalism and individual self-interest, might not be the most uplifting and ennobling of traditions, but it was a rational tradition which protected the United States from being buffeted too much by the irrational passions that seemed at times to sweep through parts of the nation and the world. And it was a safe tradition, which protected America from those ideologies that had been responsible for the great tragedies of the twentieth century.

And imbedded in this complex system of ideas was another important assumption about the nature of public life: that democracy should not in practice be too democratic, that a democratic process unmediated by the authority of dispassionate elites could lead to social instability and cultural chaos. This was shared by many prominent members of the Columbia cohort of the 1950s and 1960s who were searching for answers to these large social questions through collaborative scholarship and collaborative teaching. The effort to wrestle with these questions brought together at various times Hofstadter and Bell, Trilling and Merton, Paul Lazarsfeld and David Truman, the political scientist—who as provost in 1968 ran up against the limits of his own ideas, expressed in his scholarship, about the necessary relationship between democracy and authority. All of them worried at times about the dangers of mass politics and mass behavior, or what they sometimes called "mass man." They feared a public sphere in which passion could run amok and destroy the fragile, indispensable institutions that sustained the essential rationality of the world.

There was, in short, a tendency among these consensus liberals of the 1950s to look at dissent and radicalism and popular passion as signs of dangerous ideological absolutism, the kind of absolutism that might threaten America with the same tragedies that Germany and Russia had endured.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great liberal theologian, from Columbia's neighboring institution, Union Theological Seminary, expressed his own attraction to this sense in looking back with distaste on his own earlier attraction to more millennial visions. He wrote, "More and more of us have come to feel with Melville, Hawthorne, and Dostoyevsky, that in men's souls lie deep and unpredictable potentialities for evil that no human institutions can fully control." But what Niebuhr was implying, of course, was the importance of at least trying, both as individuals and institutions, to control them.
This careful, intelligent, at times brilliant, defense of the ordered life of the university and of the rational life of the mind was not uncontested, even at Columbia. Perhaps especially not at Columbia, because out of this same rich, interdisciplinary intellectual milieu that had produced consensus scholarship emerged, as well, a series of far more searing critiques of American life and far more radical prescriptions for the future.

The Critique of C. Wright Mills

One of these critiques came from the Columbia sociologist C. Wright Mills, a brilliant, caustic scholar who was something of a misfit at Columbia—at least by his own account—and in his profession, and whose work—while it both influenced and was influenced by his colleagues in the consensus school, if we can call it that—was in the end a very significant rejoinder to their own social vision. Unlike most of his contemporaries at Columbia, Mills was a Texan, from a lower-middle-class background whose route into scholarship included detours into Texas A&M, where he was a military cadet, and into the lower ranks of business, where he contemplated a career as a car salesman. Eventually he went to graduate school, got a PhD in sociology, taught for a while at the University of Maryland—where he first met one of his colleagues, Richard Hofstadter, who also taught at Maryland for a time before they both finally ended up at Columbia. But he was never a comfortable member of the New York intellectual crowd, at Columbia or elsewhere, and even learned to despise and became despised by many of its prominent colleagues.

Mills embarked on a series of studies, which occupied the remainder of his life, which examined the growth of the modern organizational society and the impact it had on the distribution of power among individuals, and on the capacity of individuals to live a truly democratic and fulfilling life... work that showed how this process of bureaucratization empowered a few and disempowered the many. Mills argued that far from creating the rational, ordered society that many other scholars were defending, the rise of organization was robbing individuals of their ability to make effective use of their own reason, of their ability actually to have any real autonomy in their lives. His two best-known books, *White Collar*, published in 1951, and *The Power Elite*, published in 1956, drew something close to a nightmare portrait of a world in which technocratic elites manipulated and disempowered helpless masses, and thus undermined society's capacity to sustain democracy. "The white collar people," he wrote, "had slipped quietly into modern society." This is a description that presents an image almost of the white-collar people as sort of pod people, somehow sneaking into the world and disempowering the world around them, leaving men without a spiritual and moral compass with which to achieve authenticity in their own lives.
The threat to a democratic society, Mills maintained, was not the irrational passion of individuals in groups, but the highly rational and oppressive authority of organized elites. It was the role of intellectuals, he claimed, to bear witness against this process, to encourage its victims to rise up in protest against it. Democracy, in other words, depended on less, not more, authority from elites. Toward the end of his life—he died a relatively young man in 1962—he was beginning to forge ties with the nascent New Left, whose members in turn were making extensive use of his work as a basis for their own political critiques.

The Beats

Almost simultaneously, other even younger Columbians, not faculty but students and former students at the University, were making important contributions to another revolt against the disciplined, rationalized, bureaucratized life of modern America. They went well beyond Mills' attack on the social injustice of organizational life, and challenged some even more fundamental premises of middle-class society. And these younger Columbians became important figures in a movement that has come to be known as the Beats. The Beats openly challenged the conventional values of middle-class American society: material success, social values, political habits. They rejected the intellectuals' defense of a tolerant, rational, individualistic world. They embraced instead an alternative set of values that emphasized at various times rootlessness, antimaterialism, sometimes drugs, antagonism to technology and organization, a dark, numbing despair about the nature of modern society. And they embraced as well a celebration of the instinctual as opposed to the rational life, which led them to, among other things, an open embrace of sexuality, which was far out of tune with the dominant trends of their time . . . in the fifties, an open embrace of sexuality in a way that few areas of American culture were prepared to do at that time. They were among the first important artistic movements openly to accept homosexuality as a valid form of sexual expression.

Probably the best-known Beat writer was Jack Kerouac, who entered Columbia in the fall of 1940 from Lowell, Massachusetts, on a football scholarship, and dropped out of Columbia in the middle of his sophomore year. He grew up to become in one sense an unhappy, restless man, plagued throughout his adult life by alcoholism and drug dependency; tortured, according to many who knew him, by his own sexual ambivalence. But he was nevertheless one of the more revered and influential writers of his generation, less because of the literary quality of his work—although some of it is of great quality—than because of its social content. His most successful work was his novel On the Road, published in 1957, an account of a crazy, drugged-out, cross-country trip by bus and motorcycle by two young, disenchanted men who were, it was quite clear, thinly veiled versions of Kerouac himself and his friend Neil Cassady.
The novel was an example of the genre of travel or road stories that have always been a part of American literature—beginning with Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper and continuing to this day—a tradition that uproots the individual from all of the social structures that normally contain his or her instincts and emotions, and places the people in a setting of greater freedom but also greater danger. Kerouac's novel celebrated freedom from material cares, rootlessness, communion with nature, the joys of escape from rationality, and the indulgence in emotions and physical pleasures. But it was not just a novel about joy. There was also a kind of gloomy, brooding tone in the novel that makes it, in the end, less a celebration of escape than a lament about the America that it was necessary to escape from, a lament expressed particularly clearly in its portrait of Americans that Kerouac, or at least his character in the novel, encountered along the way: people living unredeemed and perhaps unredeemable lives. For example, on a bus trip to Detroit, the character representing Kerouac strikes up a conversation with what he calls "a gorgeous country girl," a conversation he described as follows: "She was dull. . . . I tried to bring up boyfriends and sex. Her great dark eyes surveyed me with emptiness and a kind of chagrin that reached back generations and generations in her blood from not having done what was crying out to be done—whatever it was, and everybody knows what it was. 'What do you want out of life?' [I asked.] I wanted to take her and wring it out of her. She didn't have the slightest idea what she wanted. . . . She didn't know. She yawned. She was sleepy. It was too much. Nobody could tell. Nobody would ever tell. It was all over. She was 18 and most lovely, and lost." And such portraits recur again and again in Kerouac's work, and they suggest the heart of his critique, and the critique of others, of American life in this period: repression, inhibition, the numbing effects of a culture that prevented individuals from expressing their individuality and venting their instincts.

By contrast Kerouac expressed a kind of envious and perhaps naïve admiration for those areas of society that he considered open and instinctual and without repression and inhibition. He was particularly attracted to the culture of black America, a culture that he perhaps naïvely believed had the authenticity that white middle-class culture had sacrificed to order, discipline, and rationality. And he describes this view, this perhaps romanticized view, of African-American culture in a description of a walk that he took one night in Denver: "At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. . . . I wished I were . . . anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned. . . . I was only myself . . . sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America."
Probably the most influential figure of the Beat world, the man many people considered the founder of the movement, was another young Columbian, Allen Ginsberg, who attended Columbia and overlapped with Kerouac; who studied with Lionel Trilling; and who was expelled from the University for writing on the bathroom walls what some Columbia administrators considered obscenities, but what he considered poetry, and so sealing his doom signed his name to it. And he soon moved to California to write. In 1955 Ginsberg read at a coffeehouse in San Francisco a poem he had recently written that became perhaps the closest thing to an anthem that the Beats ever had; a poem that Kerouac and others considered the true credo of their generation, and that illustrates, I think very vividly, the extent of the alienation behind the Beat philosophy; a poem entitled *Howl*, which attacked virtually every aspect of modern society as corrupt and alienating. And let me read just a few lines from it. These are perhaps the most famous and most frequently quoted. "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night. . . ." Here an unusually explicit-for-its-time celebration of drugs as an escape from the numbing realities of life.

America, Ginsberg said, was consumed by the worship of Moloch, the Semitic god of war, known for requiring human sacrifices. And Moloch became a metaphor in this poem for the dehumanizing materialism of modern life. And he wrote, "Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in the armies! Old men weeping in the parks! . . . Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! . . . Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! . . . Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind! . . . Robot apartments! invincible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs! . . ."

Whatever its merits as poetry, *Howl* is a great document of its time because it so powerfully expressed an extreme version, perhaps, of a new kind of cultural vision, or at least a newly powerful kind of cultural vision—an attack on American materialism, on American technology, on organization, on suburbs, on militarism, on sexual repression, indeed on the very idea of progress and rationality that was so central to the vision that many Americans had of their own history; an attack on all the underpinnings of modern middle-class culture and society and intellectual life; an invitation to create a new kind of culture, free of repression, adverse to discipline, committed to the instinctual life. And it was this, I think, that made the Beats seem so frightening and subversive to many more conventional Americans in the 1950s—
their frank rejection of the very world that the Columbia scholars I described a few moments ago were struggling so hard to define and legitimize and perfect. The Beats turn away from the disciplined, ordered life of the postwar middle class, the postwar intellectual world—the way in which some Beats at least ignored the careful boundaries of race that mainstream white society still observed, the way they made connections with black culture, their celebration of the sensual as opposed to the rational, their sexual frankness, their openness to homosexuality. In this, of course, they had the unwitting support of some other important figures in American culture in the 1950s, none of them as far as I know connected to Columbia: rock musicians, who also crossed racial boundaries, and who also celebrated liberation from repression and discipline and gave vent openly to sensual, sexual impulses.

Just as C. Wright Mills was one of the precursors of the New Left, Ginsberg and Kerouac and their fellow Beats were auguries of the counterculture that emerged in the late 1960s, which took the once-marginal ideas of 1950s subversives and thrust them into the center of American culture. Ginsberg himself became a major figure in the counterculture, just as he had been a major figure in Beat culture. Kerouac by then was largely withdrawn, living with his mother, supporting the Vietnam War and drinking himself to death. He died, watching television in his mother’s living room, of alcohol-related hemorrhaging at the age of 47.

### Concluding Thoughts

So was Columbia at midcentury the intellectual capital of the nation? Probably no place can really claim such a title in a nation so large and diverse as the United States. But it would be hard, I think, to argue that there was any university whose intellectual life had more influence on its time than did Columbia’s in the 1950s and early 1960s.

As America moved from the seemingly consensual and conservative culture of the 1950s into the years of great turbulence that followed, one can see at Columbia some of the clearest and most sophisticated presentations of the intellectual stances that came into such stark conflict in those years. On the one hand the elegant, sophisticated, and highly cosmopolitan version of a liberal America in which rational discourse and sober, intelligent inquiry could create a stable, progressive democracy. On the other hand the harder, sometimes coarser view of a society in which democracy and authenticity depended on a shattering of its existing structures of authority, a rejection of rationality as the central value of the modern world, and its replacement with a celebration of personal freedom, instinct, and even passion—the very thing that many liberals most feared.
One can see in short in the intellectual life of Columbia in these years the emergence of contending visions of the world that clashed so dramatically and so catastrophically for many people on both sides of this divide in this very building in 1968.

Thank you very much.

**Fritz Stern Responds to Alan Brinkley**

**Robert McCaughey:** Thank you, Provost Brinkley. I would ask Fritz Stern to respond.

**Fritz Stern:** I would begin by thanking Alan Brinkley for so wise a nuanced talk, and generous. He not only exemplified Columbia at midcentury of the twentieth century, he exemplifies what remains great about Columbia today. But when I thought about Columbia at midcentury, where in fact I was very much around, the first thing that came to mind was the line from Wordsworth, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!" I owe the knowledge of that particular line from Wordsworth originally from Allen Ginsberg, who was mentioned here, who was my best friend in freshman year, when we entered Columbia College. Allen and I then on various occasions remained close, but also parted company. But only, I think, last week, in a very different context, I came across handwritten letters from him dated '46-'47 . . . '44-'45, I'm sorry, and a page and a half on a definition of *bourgeois* with all the loathing that he was able to put into his poetic and, as Alan Brinkley rightly said, occasionally coarse language. He was actually . . . and perhaps that ought to be added, there was a very generous . . . even as a freshman, which is when I met him, at registration at Old University Hall, he was clutching a newspaper called *PM*—at that time a kind of left-wing paper—and that's how we first started, so to speak. But it was he who told me—I was a premed at the time—who told me about somebody who was not particularly well known yet, even on campus, he'd just recently been appointed . . . Lionel Trilling, told me to take his course, this would change my life. And it should be said that there was a very close relationship—complicated relationship, but nevertheless close—between Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, and others, and Allen Ginsberg . . . who understood that for all his extravagance there was a poetic quality, there was great intellectual strength, and so on.

I don't want to take too much time. I do want to talk about the inside of Columbia. Alan did a magnificent job in describing the great intellectual achievements of that time. Let me just say a word about the question about us being the intellectual capital. There weren't many rivals at the time. At midcentury the world was fairly devastated, and the United States was indeed in a unique place in the world of ideas.
and the material world, and Columbia was certainly, I would've thought, and thought then, the preeminent university. I'm not sure I thought that then, because none of us did. One of the great things about Columbia at that time, in the forties and fifties and even early sixties, was we took ourselves for granted. If anything we tended to denigrate the place, and as somebody said, we always criticized it and we always stayed. That is to say, people who got offers from elsewhere would have said on one day what was wrong with Columbia—which very often had to do with what the provost indicated, not ideal leadership at the top, under former generals—but stayed because of the intellectual community.

And here I want to say two things. One, it was an intellectual community of scholar-citizens. The term *public intellectual* hadn't been coined yet. I think one assumed one was a scholar-citizen in the sense . . . very much a scholar, very much a citizen of the University, but an obligation to society, a political obligation, as well. And one of the remarkable things about the period—just in passing, it seems to me—is it could have been—and for a few people it may have been, but not at Columbia—a period of triumphalism. America had won a great war, had saved, in fact, Western civilization. But instead of triumphalism, especially at Columbia, there was a great deal of self-criticism. And I just want to say at the same time that for those of us who were attuned to it—so to speak, or attuned to some of the luminaries that were mentioned—we read some of the great critics of liberalism as well. I think of how important to us Edmund Burke, Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky were. But on campus another thing that has to be said is the men—and that's another point that has to be made, they were mostly but not exclusively men, but almost exclusively. I had the great privilege of studying with Ruth Benedict, who was in anthropology and taught me a lot—but these men took teaching with intense seriousness. That I can testify to, and in particular to the two men to whom I owe, in a way, the most: Jacques Barzun, the historian, and in some ways perhaps even more to Lionel Trilling, the literary critic. They took their teaching, as I say—and they took the College, as well as the University, but the College . . . we didn't talk about it as being the heart, it was the heart, you didn't have to say it—they took it very, very seriously. And yet at the same time, in looking back on it there was a kind of lighthearted seriousness about it all which was delightful.

Alan Brinkley has already talked about the fact that it was interdisciplinary. It was also—as I can testify, both as a student and then as a young faculty person—it was intergenerational. That is to say, age didn't terribly much matter. What mattered was a certain degree of interest in the intellectual life, and you were admitted, so to speak, to the community. The intergenerational and the interdisciplinary quality of Columbia at the time was not by prescription, not by theory, it simply was there. It existed as if it couldn't be anything else, and it seems to me that that was very, very important.
Again it needs to be said that—I'm repeating what the provost has said—that to have at one and the same place Trilling, Barzun, Hofstadter, Truman, Ernest Nagel, Rudolph Wittkower, the list could go on, was a very heady and also kind of intimidating moment and existence, but it was absolutely extraordinary. And I say again that the degree of collaboration among us . . . that is to say, interdisciplinary by nature: Barzun, a cultural historian, Trilling, a literary critic, C. Wright Mills has already been mentioned, and the young people. I learned my American history—after I abandoned premedical, went into European history—I learned my American history because Dick Hofstadter trusted me to read his manuscripts, as he trusted other people to read his manuscripts. I must say it was the greatest possible introduction to American history and to a superb historical mind.

I do want to—just to show that I'm capable of it—I do want to enter one tiny note of qualification to what the provost said. And that has to do with the commitment on the part of the men that he mentioned to rationalism. That is absolutely true. But in two particular instances, which I want to specify, I think what was remarkable was that someone like Lionel Trilling, in the great book called *The Liberal Imagination*, understood the limitations of rationality, and insisted on the importance of the emotional life, of the combination of emotion and the intellect. And of course Hofstadter was committed to a rational world, but my goodness, did he have an interest in cracks, did he have an interest in the irrational, and in the emotion . . . that is to say in the paranoid—as in that famous essay that was already mentioned—element in American politics and American society . . . with the overarching fear that David Truman had, that what had happened in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century there is no guarantee, as David Truman, one of the most sober of political scientists, said, that this can not happen in a different way in this country.

Let me simply end by saying I immensely—as you can imagine from what I said at the very beginning—appreciated and thought it was really both generous and very imaginative of the provost to talk both about the luminaries and the counterculture, about Kerouac and especially about my friend Ginsberg. But having said that and having certainly . . . would want to pay my tribute to Ginsberg, I would want to recommend to you as it were in a way a final answer, the intellectual answer, to some of the things that that counterculture stood for. And it was I believe Lionel Trilling’s last book called *Sincerity and Authenticity*. And here was somebody who did understand about the importance of poetry, the importance of emotions, and who understood both the appeal of what the Ginsbergs or the Herbert Marcuses and other people were saying, and the enormous danger, and ultimately the value, of combining in some way rationality and emotion. And that is what I hope we'll continue to do at Columbia. Thank you.
Casey Blake Responds to Alan Brinkley

Casey Blake: Well, I must say first of all that Alan Brinkley and Fritz Stern are hard acts to follow. I won’t try to compete with Fritz’s powerful and resonant memories of the midcentury moment at Columbia. Nor will I try to compete with Alan's eloquence in recounting the history of intellectual life at Columbia during this period. And I'm delighted to say that Alan has in many ways preempted many of my prepared remarks, so I'll spare you as much repetition as possible.

What I will do, or at least try to do, is perhaps reframe the story that Alan and Fritz have told, and maybe play a bit of the contrarian role in my comments.

If it is plausible, as I think it is, to argue that Columbia University was the intellectual capital of the United States in the middle of the twentieth century, it's because its faculty—particularly in the humanities and social sciences—stood at the epicenter of a New York culture that had produced by the 1940s a consolidated and self-confident modernist intelligentsia, the likes of which had not been seen before in the United States, and frankly has not been seen since. This liberal, modernist intelligentsia—essentially the cosmopolitan liberals that Alan described in his talk—adhered to a set of ideological, political, and moral positions that in some ways was self-consciously unstable, self-consciously contradictory. These were liberals who were anti-populist. These were critics of the American political tradition who drew deeply on their youthful experiences with Marxism, but had given up any socialist hopes. These were people committed to aesthetic modernism, very familiar with the great traditions of Western modernism in the arts and in literature, but who were fearful of the moral consequences of the dissemination of modernism, at least as a moral spirit, among the young.

These were also people who shared the tragic sensibility that they had inherited from psychoanalysis, existentialism, and the crisis theology of honorary Columbian Reinhold Niebuhr, even if they shared none of Niebuhr's Protestant theological commitments. These were people then who articulated a set of positions, in cultural life, in politics, and in ethics, that I think they understood to be conducive to criticism and self-criticism. At their best, it seems to me, they were committed to challenging the complacency that marks not only the intellectual culture of the liberal left, but perhaps of the United States generally. And I think what's striking and admirable about this cohort—and I'm thinking here of people like Trilling, Hofstadter, Meyer Shapiro, Jacques Barzun, and others who have been mentioned—is the extent to which they created a culture of criticism and self-criticism that to a certain extent authorized and energized their critics.
In fact what's remarkable to me in looking back at Columbia at midcentury is the extent to which the University maintained and fostered connections to alternative intellectual traditions, traditions that either preceded or postdated the liberal cosmopolitanism that Alan Brinkley has described, or challenged it outright. As Alan has mentioned, Trilling's student Allen Ginsberg, but also his student Norman Podhoretz, produced challenges to Trilling's brand of liberalism: on the one hand coming from the countercultural Beat movement, on the other hand coming from what would eventually be called neo-conservatism. C. Wright Mills, of course, served as a godfather for the emerging New Left. Columbia law graduate Paul Robeson provided a bridge back to the Old Left of the Popular Front, and forward to the Civil Rights Movement. Teachers College served as a haven for John Dewey's philosophy of education, even if pragmatism itself was disappearing from the philosophy department's curriculum and undergoing a withering critique in the works of people like Niebuhr and Trilling. Likewise Union Theological Seminary kept the social-gospel tradition alive, if only as a kind of whipping boy for Niebuhr's criticisms of that tradition. The liberal faculty in English and history at midcentury would turn out to have unlikely intellectual offspring in their PhD students: feminist literary scholars like Kate Millett and Carolyn Heilbrun, and Marxist historians like Eugene Genovese and Christopher Lash. In this sense I think Columbia was indeed an intellectual capital insofar as it housed both a Cold War–era liberal, modernist intelligentsia at the pinnacle of its self-confidence and cultural authority, and at the same time nurtured its challengers.

Having said all that I can't help but look back and notice the limited vision of much of the Columbia intelligentsia in the years between 1945 and 1965, as well as the brevity of its moment of cultural leadership. Looking back from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, I’m struck by how much of the ferment that would soon transform American academic, intellectual, and political life took place somewhere else other than the Columbia campus during these years, and in many cases far from New York City itself.

Trilling famously claimed in his introduction to *The Liberal Imagination* that there was no serious intellectual conservative tradition in the United States, but he was, of course, wrong. At the University of Chicago, in the offices of William Buckley's *National Review*, and in many other venues, both secular and religious, conservative thinkers were mounting a counterattack on liberalism that went unnoticed on Morningside Heights until the Goldwater campaign of 1964, if even then.

C. Wright Mills notwithstanding, the most serious centers of New Left thinking were at state universities: in Madison, Ann Arbor, and Berkeley, and not, frankly, at Columbia. *Studies on the Left*, the most important New Left journal of this period, was published at the University of Wisconsin under the leadership of historian
William Appleman Williams, who took his inspiration not from Richard Hofstadter but from Hofstadter’s predecessor, Charles Beard. West Coast cities like San Francisco and Portland, Oregon, can make a more plausible claim than Morningside Heights to having given birth to the Beat movement and having shaped an alternative modernist tradition in arts and letters.

Even in the New York area many of the most consequential developments in cultural life were taking place elsewhere: with James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones—later Amiri Baraka—working in Harlem and in Greenwich Village; a new artistic avant-garde taking hold downtown, energized by figures such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Jasper Johns; and then the folk music scene that was emerging in Greenwich Village around a figure like the youthful Bob Dylan.

Betty Friedan lived and wrote across the river in Rockland County, as did Mills and labor historian Herbert Gutman, all reformist and radical public intellectuals who kept their distance, to some extent, from the liberal cosmopolitan intelligentsia at Columbia. If these artists and intellectuals were modernists, they were modernists in a tradition that no doubt unsettled Lionel Trilling and Meyer Shapiro. Theirs was the modernism in the streets that Trilling described when he surveyed the cultural and political scene of the late 1960s.

It's striking too how many other important intellectual currents of midcentury America took hold somewhere else other than Columbia. The great tradition of American writing on urbanism and architecture—think of Robert Park, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs—developed somewhere else than Morningside Heights, even though Jacobs herself had some rather pointed comments to make about the negative consequences of the McKim, Mead, and White campus for the street life of upper Broadway. Harvard's GSD, Yale's Architecture School, and the Illinois Institute of Technology were the country’s preeminent centers for postwar architectural modernism and urban planning. By the late 1960s architects and urbanists were more interested in learning from Las Vegas, in Robert Venturi’s famous phrase, than in learning from Morningside Heights.

To pick a couple of other examples, the Frankfurt School of Marxist social theorists briefly found a safe haven at Columbia, thanks to the generous assistance of Columbia sociologist Robert Lynd, but in the end their work found a warmer welcome at the graduate faculty of The New School for Social Research, which counted among its members Hannah Arendt and other refugees from Nazi and fascist persecution. And despite Mills’ famous—or depending on one's perspective, infamous—enthusiasm for Fidel Castro's Cuba, I’m not aware of a sustained intellectual engagement among arts-and-sciences faculty with the anticolonial movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin
America during this period, at least outside the area studies programs at this university.

It would not be fair, I think, to charge the Columbia-centered intelligentsia of the mid-twentieth century with provincialism, with the provincialism of the cosmopolitans, as it were. This group's urbanity; its sophisticated approach to the interplay of politics, culture, and ethics; and its conception of the intellectual's public role are not characteristics one associates with provincialism. And yet there is a way, in retrospect, in which the University appears to have been strangely remote from many of the intellectual, political, and cultural currents that were remaking the United States, Europe, and the world beyond in the middle years of the last century.

Columbia was an intellectual capital at the precise moment when a liberal-modernist synthesis was consolidated as a worldview and enjoyed a prestige that is unimaginable today. That synthesis remains a remarkable and admirable achievement a half century later, but by the late 1960s that synthesis would unravel and the public authority of its defenders would come under attack from all sides, including, as Provost Brinkley said, in this building. We do the proponents of that synthesis the greatest honor, I think, by avoiding nostalgia, and instead examining their achievements with the same critical, if sympathetic, perspective that they brought to their country and its culture.

Thanks very much.

**Question-and-Answer Period—Part 1**

**Robert McCaughey:** Provost Brinkley has decided to hold his cards where he laid them down in the first instance, and I'd like to move fairly quickly to the question-and-answer period to give you some opportunities in the audience to ask either the main speaker or the two respondents questions of your interest. One anecdote, however. After all, Columbia is in New York, and New York is largely about real estate. And it does strike me that the density of the situation here in the 1950s was in and of itself sure to send off the kinds of intellectual sparks that I think both Provost Brinkley and the respondents suggested. There's one story that came to me from both sources in this instance. It occurred in Hamilton Hall, in the stairway, with both Professor Trilling apparently coming to an evening seminar and Professor Mills leaving to get on his Harley and motor up to Putnam County, where he lived. And as they crossed each other in the stairwell, Mills, who was certainly given to certain caustic remarks—and Trilling approaching and passed Mills, Mills said, "Hereith come the American Celebration." And both of them immediately repaired to their respective communities to tell how
awful the situation was to each of them that Trilling, who thought he had written a series of essays that went to the heart of the American condition, and then to be described as having celebrated the American condition by someone who had a room just down the hall. Let's turn to question and answers, if we can. There are mikes set in either of the aisles, and please . . .

**Woman:** May we continue the discussion from last week, and of course what you've been saying now, and that is the relationship between Columbia and New York City? Because last week there was an emphasis on New York as the center of corporate life and commerce and international life, such as the UN. And one wonders how this intellectual framing of consensus and cosmopolitan life was affected by being in New York. And you mentioned C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* . . . well, here's someone who comes from Texas. Was he reacting to what he saw of corporate life in New York, or the provincialism when you speak about Kerouac wanting to go on the road, going off to the small towns, celebrating the provinces? So could you address yourselves more to the question of the significance of New York City in the development of the intellectual thought?

**Alan Brinkley:** Well, I think Casey offered a beginning of an answer to that question . . . at least a beginning of an answer to that question, and I would endorse what he said about the absolute centrality of New York City to the character of this university, particularly in the period after World War II, when it wasn't just Columbia but New York that was achieving a kind of unparalleled preeminence, at least for the first time among cities not just in the United States but perhaps in the world, in the war ravaged world of which it was now certainly the commercial and financial capital and arguably also the cultural capital. And I suppose the question that you ask is how did a city so heavily committed to commerce become as well a city that nurtured a series of extremely important intellectual and cultural traditions that were in many ways very critical of commerce? I don't really have an answer to that question, except to say that great cities throughout history, great cultural capitals throughout history—Paris, London, Rome, Beijing, others—become magnets, I think, for people of ambition and vision in search of like-minded people, which for some reason . . . it was the capital of the art world, the art world not just of the United States but of the entire world. It was the capital of theater, as it still perhaps is. It was the capital of fashion. It was the capital of journalism. It was the capital of many things that were indirectly related or not related at all to Wall Street and the corporate towers of midtown. And so I don't think there's a contradiction between this university being an intellectual capital, if that's a fair description of it, in a city that is in fact known around the world perhaps primarily as a financial capital.

**Man:** For Professor Brinkley, thank you for a wonderful talk. I think Professor Blake is a little harsh on Columbia. We can't be all things to all people. Just to add two
comments, I was an undergraduate in midcentury and there was a Columbia tradition of teaching which you see in perhaps a lesser light than Hofstadter—someone like Jim Shenton who died this year, who carried the teaching torch forward even if he was not a pioneer at the level of Hofstadter. But it’s curious that in considering this question of intellectual capital, science is never mentioned. And as far as I know science is somewhere in the intellectual realm. As a lowly undergraduate I took a basic chemistry course and a premed to boot with [name unintelligible], and only discovered much later in my naiveté that he was a Nobel Prize winner, as were many other physicists, mathematicians, and chemists at that time. Thank you.

**Alan Brinkley:** Well I’ll take that as a comment and not a question. But you’re certainly right that a full picture, which I didn't pretend to be giving, of Columbia's intellectual life in this period would have to include the great scientists who were here in those years, and who helped establish the tradition of science that we’re still attempting to uphold.

**Fritz Stern:** Take somebody like Rabi as a prime example of somebody who was also what I called a scholar-citizen in a very profound way.

**Robert McCaughey:** But I think you may also have touched on another issue that does speak to Columbia of the twentieth century. The term two cultures that C. P. Snow popularized in the 1950s is directly attributable to a conversation he had with I. I. Rabi, talking about Columbia University among other aspects of American culture. Please.

**Woman:** Along that line what I wanted to bring up was Margaret Mead's role. I thought both Professor Brinkley’s sort of summary of these two contrasting cultures in some ways that you presented . . . but also to Casey Blake's question about Africa . . . because I thought Margaret Mead was a very interesting bridge, both in terms of the respect for different cultures and their traditions and trying to understand them. But maybe less known is her role in the Macy Foundation . . . Josiah Macy Foundation conferences that were held from the forties, just the period you’re looking at. And what's interesting is she was somebody connected with Columbia as an anthropologist, among Norbert Wiener and Gregory Bateson, but a number of psychologists, engineers, mathematicians . . . and if people get to look at the Macy conferences, which are now again published, on cybernetics, those set a foundation also for the computer and information science that is now a very significant part of our world. So I think that she's a very interesting piece of that connection. And also I thought the other piece is that she tried to look at social structures, whereas a number of those other people didn’t. But Margaret Mead . . . and I thought Norbert Wiener was interested in that . . . is there a way to understand and have a science of
social structures. But I thought Mead carried that forward, so perhaps to add that, and I welcome any comments about her and that period.

**Alan Brinkley:** Well, thank you for that, and of course I agree that Margaret Mead was an extremely important figure both at Columbia and in the world, and that the anthropological . . . the rise of modern anthropology, and its contribution to a new kind of relativism in thinking about cultures, was a critical part of the sort of intellectual turn that much of American academia and American intellectual life was taking in the middle of the century. So I do appreciate your raising Margaret Mead because she was very important for that.

**Man:** Professor Brinkley, you mentioned . . . Provost Brinkley, you mentioned that Columbia was late in coming to interdisciplinary studies, but as an undergraduate in the 1950s, mid-fifties, I was amazed by the breadth of knowledge of many of my professors, and particularly related to the Core Curriculum of humanities and Contemporary Civilization. Indeed, Fritz Stern taught me CCB in about 1956, '55, something like that. And you know, people came from all different departments to teach courses, which in the case of Humanities Lit was not only literature, it was also religion, it was also philosophy, and also to some degree history. Contemporary Civilization certainly was involved with political science, economics, and in its own way history and social sciences. I wondered to what degree the fact that Columbia had this core curriculum, which lasted through the abandonment of similar programs at many other colleges, brought a breadth to the faculty that may not have existed in some other schools?

**Alan Brinkley:** Well I certainly agree with you, and I believe I said in my talk that the interdisciplinary spirit at Columbia was expressed not in formal academic programs—as it was in other universities at the time, American studies programs, and so forth—but represented most clearly, in curricular terms at least, in the Core Curriculum and in other curricular innovations at Columbia. I guess the question you’re really asking is how did this core curriculum, which is firmly rooted in what to many people must seem a very old-fashioned notion of Western culture, has survived with such health and vibrancy through all these years of turbulence and change and challenges in which many other universities have long since abandoned any such effort? And I’m not sure I know the answer to that. It’s not, of course, because Columbia has been insulated from the turbulence of these years, and it’s not because Columbia has not represented on its faculty people who are committed to the study of and representation of other cultures, and who are in fact themselves very critical of Western culture. I suppose in part the core has survived for so long because it has such a loyal and powerful constituency, its alumni, because there are so many faculty at Columbia who are devoted to the core. And because the core is so prominent a part, the defining part, of the life of Columbia, at least Columbia
Casey Blake: If I could just add something here. This is a very interesting question; it's one I've given some thought to as the director of an interdisciplinary program that only began with my arrival here in 1999. American studies at Columbia arrived sixty years after the founding of the American studies program at Barnard, even though during this period in particular one finds among the Columbia faculty some of the most influential figures in the American-studies movement. Once you've named Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, Margaret Mead, and any number of other figures here, you've in fact named the most intellectually consequential and influential figures in the mid-twentieth-century American-studies field. I think there is both an intellectual and a structural reason, perhaps, for the slowness with which Columbia developed interdisciplinary programs. Certainly the prominence of the core in the education of undergraduates is part of the story. Students devoting so much time to the core that they had little time afterwards to devote to more focused study meant that it was difficult, I suppose, to generate majors or other programs that were self-consciously interdisciplinary. But it may also have been the case that Columbia faculty, who felt free to cross-disciplinary boundaries, did not see any reason to create curricular structures that enabled them to do the kind of work they were already doing. Figures like Hofstadter, Bell, and company were free to pursue interests that ranged across the disciplines. And here I think the University was unique in giving its faculty and its graduate students that kind of freedom.

Question-and-Answer Period—Part 2

Man: As I sat and listened I felt I was in a movie theater watching a newsreel rather than CNN. And what wasn't captured is the student population in the fifties. It was a time of panty raids as opposed to student protest. It was a time of freshman-sophomore kidnapping rather than symposia. It was a time of still-the-peak-of Columbia athleticism with Lou Little and with the defeat of Army in 1947. It was when Columbia became a national university because of a president from the University and a general becoming president of the United States. And much of the intellectualism and everything that was well described, most of us were able to take part of in pieces, but we never really appreciated the totality of the intellectual success and empire on the campus. And I think when you describe the fifties, though the faculty was superb, much of it was not given to the student body. And I don't know whose fault that was. But I thank my memories of Mark Van Doren and Quentin Anderson and all the others. I was not able to participate fully because I was a premed also, but it lives with me all the time. And the one thing that a student captured in the fifties was not the education, but the purpose and the stimulation to
still learn. And Columbia provides even to the alumni that environment today, so I thank you all.

**Alan Brinkley:** Thank you.

**Woman:** You all spoke to the importance of teaching on the undergraduate as well as graduate level here at Columbia, and I'm reminded of a wonderful letter that is in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library over in Butler. Mark Van Doren is writing to Allen Ginsberg and it is post-*Howl* but I don't remember the date. They must have been discussing whether Van Doren actually understood Ginsberg's work, and Van Doren writes to Ginsberg, "Allen, you would be disappointed if I understood it all." And I wondered if you could speak a little bit further about the interrelationships of the students and the faculty.

**Alan Brinkley:** I think the question, which is rooted in part in the relationship between Trilling and Ginsberg, was a more general question about the relationship between the intellectual world that we've discussed tonight and the students at Columbia at the time. Am I right about that? To what degree, and Fritz you would know better than I would certainly, to what degree were students—you know, putting aside the obvious exceptional and famous students like Ginsberg—to what degree were students a part of this intellectual world, in your memory?

**Fritz Stern:** That is very hard to say. I think frankly it depended very much on the student. I think the possibilities were there. There was . . . on the office door of Barzun there was the little note saying his office hours were on Wednesdays from 12 to 1, and he accused me of putting down from 12 to 12:05. That was actually not true. He was not particularly keen on seeing people. When you did see him, when you had a serious problem, he was a superb advisor, mentor, and so on. No handholding. Others as it were might have taken a different approach. So there was a fairly widespread way. And I think that many of the people that were mentioned here tonight, and many that were not mentioned or mentioned in the question period, such as Mark Van Doren, Quentin Anderson, and many others, were invaluable mentors to students. Don't ask me to quantify it. I can't. I just know from my own experience and from listening to students over the generations that they did find this mentoring as immensely important. It wasn't . . . again, I would say, just as the interdisciplinary matter was not something that was programmed, that was prescribed. It was part of what they thought a teacher, a scholar, should do, should be. And that was it.

**Casey Blake:** As a postscript here it's worth noting that one of Trilling's most powerful and moving essays was titled "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," published in the early 1960s, an essay in which he reflected on what for him were
the potentially disturbing moral consequences of the very act of teaching modern literature in which he was engaged. It's hard to imagine too many other universities in the middle of the twentieth century in which there was such an intellectual, vital, and fluid interchange between undergraduate teaching and scholarly writing.

**Robert McCaughey:** Last question . . . last two. Go ahead.

**Man:** Okay. I wondered as I heard the questions asked if there was a flaw at Columbia or a flaw in American understanding of intellectuals that Mead and Rabi get introduced as a footnote, but when we talk about intellectual history we don't see our scientists and the scientific work at Columbia that was done in the fifties and sixties, and is still being done, as somehow a major contribution. So I raise as the question, where does it lie that we devalue the scientist as intellectual, and then we lose whatever that contribution is? What Snow did was he said the optimism comes from the scientist, the humanist can only see the human condition and wonder how any of us survive, it's so overwhelming. And then he said but the scientist has his optimism but doesn't know how to connect it to humanity. And somehow I thought we lost the scientists again tonight, and I don't know whether that's particularly Columbia in some way, or whether it's in general a flaw. I'd appreciate comments on that.

**Fritz Stern:** I just want to say a quick remark, if I may. Much of what you say rings true, and I certainly know from many experiences that scientists tend to be extraordinarily well educated and tend to be very often humanists of the most extraordinary kind. One of the great failures that Columbia had in the 1940s and 1950s was that at a time when other universities were doing it, we tried and failed . . . and that is to have a good course, or rather a good curriculum, in the history of science, which would've helped people to understand the richness of the natural sciences. We tried every so often, but I do remember that basically we failed.

**Man:** Just a couple of comments about the relationship to students first. Paul Oskar Kristeller, in his classes in the philosophy department, was the only faculty member that I ever recall, in auditing courses in many departments, who complained when he had office hours that were not subscribed to by the students in the class. And he was very bitter when students didn't show up for his classes. Secondly, I'm very sympathetic to the remarks about science here, because in physics and chemistry and later in geology and in biochemistry, the medical school, Columbia was not just the capital of the nation but the capital of the world. And I think that that is a point that maybe some subsequent investigations could look into. As far as the earlier statement by one of the other commentators about the Core Curriculum, as it's now being called, it's not in fact the case that it has disappeared. I've followed it for going on fifty years now, having known Barr and Buchanan and Adler and Hutchins . . .
there's a retired professor of philosophy in Florida who has actually studied and published on this subject. And while it may be missing from a couple of our competitors—that is the major universities—it has actually spread among many, many colleges and universities in this country, literally hundreds of them. So Columbia's influence is very wide. Columbia is the source and the influence of that program of education . . . is very wide in this nation, even if it's not at, you know, the red-brick college or wherever up in Boston.

Robert McCaughey: With that act of Cantabridgian dismissal, we should perhaps end this part of our session and repair to the faculty room immediately behind the banner here for refreshments. But before doing so I would like to thank the audience for engaging these historians this evening in a quite lively debate, and of course thank the speaker and the respondents as well.