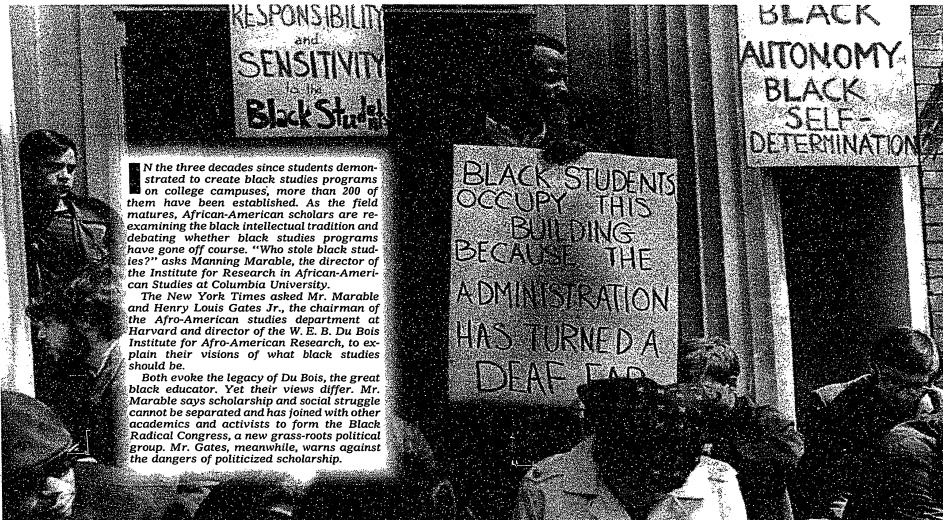


## A Debate on Activism in Black Studies



The beginnings: Students at Northwestern University demonstrating during a campaign in 1968 to include courses on black history in the curriculum.

### A Plea That Scholars Act Upon, Not Just Interpret, Events

By MANNING MARABLE

African-American studies, once considered an insurgent outsider in white academic circles, has in recent years become part of the intellectual establishment.

Nearly all major universities have established programs, departments and research centers in African-American studies, as well as other innovative interdisciplinary programs in gender studies and ethnic studies. The core requirements of undergraduate curriculums



Manning Marable, who would use black studies to help black people improve their lives.

usually include one or more of these courses. Foundations are now actively supporting a number of major research projects initiated by black studies scholars. Most programs work cooperatively with other traditional departments, including those programs that have an ideological adherence to "Afrocentrism."

Yet this success has been achieved at a certain price. As black studies is being assimilated into mainstream academia, perhaps it is important to restate the key ideas that informed the historical and contemporary field. At the heart of black studies is the black intellectual tradition, an enormous body of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities by and about people of African descent. That intellectual tradition has generally been "descriptive," "corrective" and "prescriptive."

First, scholars sought to richly describe the contours of black life and history, examining the reality of the black experience from the point of view of black people themselves. The black intellectual tradition has also tried to correct the racist stereotypes and assumptions of black genetic or cultural inferiority that unfortunately still exist within much white scholarship. It challenged Eurocentric notions of beauty, which have often been grounded in a contempt for black culture.

Finally, black studies was also prescriptive: it was an integral part of the struggle to eradicate racism and empower black people. In short, there were both theoretical and practical connections between scholarship and social change.

Yet many black studies departments today no longer link the two. The function of black studies scholarship should be more than the celebration of heritage and self-esteem; it must utilize history and culture as tools by which an oppressed people can

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Henry Louis Gates Jr., who defends the ideal of knowledge for its own sake.

### A Call to Protect Academic Integrity From Politics

By HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.

The founding fathers of what we now think of as African-American Studies were acutely aware of the distinction between scholarship that is political and politicized scholarship. Writing in 1925, the illustrious black bibliophile Arthur Schomburg worried aloud about propaganda masquerading as scholarship: work that was "on the whole pathetically over-corrective, ridiculously over-laudatory; apologetics turned into biographical work marred at its core by 'naïve controversy and petty bragadocio,' work that 'has glibly tried to prove half of the world's geniuses to have been Negroes and to trace the pedigree of 19th-century Americans from the Queen of Sheba.'"

The great black intellectual and activist W. E. B. Du Bois himself, writing in 1933, warned black scholars against "whitewashing or translating wish into fact." Closer to our own time, the sociologist Orlando Patterson memorably warned against the sort of black studies programs that utilize the "three P's" approach — black history as the discovery

of princes, pyramids and pageantry." Such an approach, he argued, "does violence to the facts... is ideologically bankrupt and is methodologically and theoretically deficient." Would that these eloquent warnings had been heeded. Today, scholars in the field of African-American studies struggle to agree on the most basic facts of our history. A vocal minority seeks the deepest truths about black America in cultish, outlandish claims about the racial ancestry of Cleopatra or the genetics of "soul." It's within this turbulent context that questions about the relation between scholarship and activism inevitably arise.

Intellectuals like Schomburg and Du Bois thought that all scholarship about "the Negro" would be "political," either implicitly or explicitly, given the fact that, as Schomburg put it, "The Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture." That's why even Schomburg, a man who loved the library like life itself, argued for what he called an a priori "racial motive" in black scholarship, while Du Bois stressed that "the American Negro problem is and must be the center" of the scholarly concerns of the "college-bred Negro." Since few, if any, colleges and universities offered courses that in-

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## Museum Of the Indian Drops Its Designer

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

From the beginning, the concept of the National Museum of the American Indian, planned for the Mall in Washington, was meant to be a design apart. American Indian elders were called in for "vision sessions" to guide the architects. The chief designer, Douglas Cardinal, a prominent 64-year-old Canadian, and with his collaborators, GBQC Architects of Philadelphia, adding a serious complication to the life of the \$10 million project.

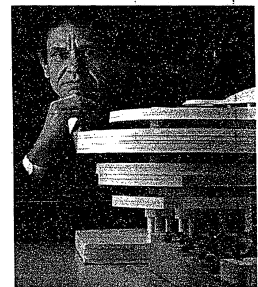
And soon he began to fashion a dramatic, swooping building of rough-hewn limestone, meant to resemble cliffs carved away, with windows aligned so that at winter and summer solstices, the sun's rays would shoot in like beams to illuminate sacred objects. At the center, he planned a circular gathering spot, or potmac, for storytellers and dancers.

The museum, sitting next to the Capitol, would be a symbol of forgiveness and healing, he said.

But in what it called a "drastic action," the Smithsonian Institution has terminated its contract with Mr. Cardinal, a prominent 64-year-old Canadian, and with his collaborators, GBQC Architects of Philadelphia, adding a serious complication to the life of the \$10 million project.

The termination, first reported this week by The Washington Post, has come after long wrangling between the architect, who considers himself a "warrior," and the museum over delays and contractual disagreements. Last year, saying he had "run out of resources" because of the extra hours he was putting in, Mr. Cardinal decided to "make a stand," as he put it, by withholding his architectural drawings, in effect holding the project hostage.

Failure to deliver the working and technical drawings, as well as procedural delays between the two firms, were major reasons



Douglas Cardinal, the chief designer of the planned National Museum of the American Indian in Washington.

for the dismissal, Smithsonian officials said. "It's a step we've taken with the greatest reluctance," said David J. Umansky, a spokesman for the Smithsonian Institution, which had planned to break ground on the 250,000-square-foot project this fall. "Mr. Cardinal did not live up to the contract. We came to the difficult decision that we had to move on if this building was going to open in the year 2002. We have an obligation to produce the museum with the money we have." The Smithsonian, he added, relies on Congressional appropriations. "This Congress looks very carefully on how money is being spent."

The museum says it plans to build Mr. Cardinal's design — which has already passed the hurdles of approval by the federal Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission — with a successor yet to be named.

"It's obviously been very painful," said the museum's director, J. Richard West, a Cheyenne. "But it is our absolute intention to build Douglas's design, and to give him credit for it, with continued native involvement." The dismissal, however, has an-

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### BALLET REVIEW

## A Sassy New Duet Danced to a Sprightly Old Solo

By JACK ANDERSON

Eliot Feld has choreographically shouted "Yo!" again. Last year he created "Yo Shakespeare," a strenuous and sassy piece in which two men moved sometimes in competition and other times in cooperation to jaunty contemporary music by Michael Gordon. Now he's given us "Yo Johann," an equally strenuous and sassy duet for the same men, Jason Jordan and Jassen Virolas. The music is just as jaunty. But this time the composer is Johann Sebastian Bach.

With Karen Rostron playing excerpts from Bach's Partita No. 3 in E Major for Solo Violin, the duet received its premiere at Ballet Tech's

performance on Thursday night at the Joyce Theater. It proved to be a portrait of two gruff yet basically good-natured guys.

The men kept approaching, then easing away. Each tried to outdo the other in leaps. Yet this was horseplay, not deadly rivalry. And passages in which each man supported the other suggested that Mr. Feld's characters could hide tender feelings behind their swagger.

Mr. Feld choreographed for their faces, as well as for their arms and legs, giving them expressions of amusement and amaze. Most of the ballet had little to do with the music's period style. But in one sequence Mr. Jordan and Mr. Virolas struck poses as if about to perform

an elegant Baroque dance, only to let their movements turn either floppy or assertive. They were equally convincing showing the men's bumptiousness and their vulnerability.

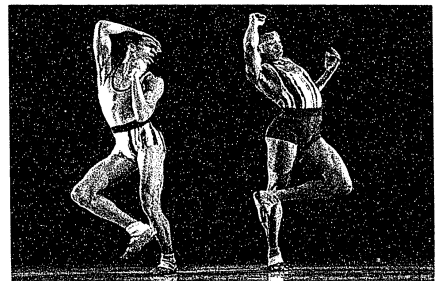
Although Mr. Feld belabored a few choreographic effects, "Yo Johann" remains an agreeably energetic trifling. Two other pieces were brash on a grander scale.

"Paper Tiger," choreographed in 1989 to blues recordings by Leon Redbone, abounds with eccentric shuffles and hops. And when Mr. Redbone sings "Aw You Sassy Dog," Mr. Feld has dancers burst into canine howls.

Movements occasionally look too self-consciously odd. But one scene is strikingly bizarre: a solo for Daniel

Levans to "Sweet Sue (Just You)." Mr. Feld turned Mr. Levans into a grotesque figure by placing a mask on the back of the dancer's head and treating the back of his body as if it were his front. Mr. Levans was emotionally as well as anatomically oriented, for he played a lovelorn fellow who kept pursuing a romantic ideal in the form of a doll that dangled always before him on a rod attached to his costume.

"Echo," a solo from 1986 to music by Steve Reich, was an artistic union of head and heart. The way Patricia Tuhill kept steadily crossing the stage while letting her arms curve and ripple made the choreography a blending of logic and sensuality.



Jassen Virolas, left, and Jason Jordan of Ballet Tech in "Yo Johann."

# Museum Is Dropping Its Designer

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gered some of the Indian elders who have taken part in the "vision sessions," among them, Fred Kiva. New, president emeritus of the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, N.M. "The plans for this building have been drawn by a genius Native American artist who has taken the trouble to confer with Indians at every step of the process," he said. "We have a fantastic design produced by a Native American. They have no ethical right to take a man's design, whether he's Indian or Chinese. It's like letting someone finish your painting. Why don't they recognize the importance and allow me to carry forth to see his design put into place proudly?"

Mr. Cardinal and GBCQ are planning to file an appeal of the decision, which they can do up to April 27. In the meantime, the museum has hired another architectural team — James Stewart Polshek and Partners of New York and Tobey and Davis of Reston, Va. — to conduct a "peer review" of the project, to "see where we are," Mr. Umansky said. Mr. Polshek is currently renovating the Cooper-Hewitt at the Smithsonian, and the cultural resource center for the Indian museum, in Maryland.

There has been some speculation that Mr. Polshek might take over the project, which he denied. But he said that, if he did it, it would be to assist the Federal Government in a difficult situation. I do think the building will be completed in a way that will please everyone.

Mr. Cardinal, who built a sweat lodge for himself 12 miles from the Washington Monument after moving to Washington to work on the design, is well known in Canada for infusing his buildings with his native experience. He is "metaphorically" for mixed ancestry; his mother was French, German and Mohawk, his father Blackfoot, French and Ojibwa. His best-known building is the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, a copper-domed, mask-like structure across the river from Ottawa. The Indian Museum was his first major United States commission.

The current dispute unfolded last year, when Mr. Cardinal asked the Smithsonian for additional reimbursement for work beyond the hours allotted in his contract. "They indicated to me they would make those provisions," he said. The museum advanced him \$150,000, but by the end of the year, he said, he was "\$300,000 in the hole."

It was at that point, he said, that some of the elders advised him to hold his drawings until the problem was resolved. When he got an anonymous donor, he said, he continued the work after he was dismissed because he "wanted to get the project back on track."

Mr. Cardinal is no stranger to controversy. In the early 1980's he made headlines in Canada when he suggested that, rather than compromise on his design for the Museum of Canadian Civilization, they "bulldoze it back into a park." They did not, and it opened to great fanfare.

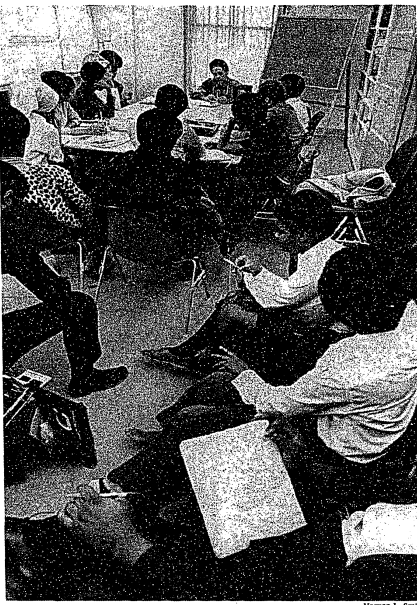
The Canadian architectural historian Trevor Boddy has written that the unusual cast of Mr. Cardinal's designs, which have generally been situated in remote places, along with a cultivated persona as an outsider, tended to keep him off the architectural A-lists.

"Douglas Cardinal is a survivor," Mr. Boddy said in a telephone interview, "and he tends to be routinely underestimated. Every single project he's done has had a crisis like this. He's a very complex person."

Mr. Cardinal, who relies heavily on state-of-the-art computer technology to design his voluptuous forms. "They want to be sure the whole building is done with honor, that it be a strong expression of their voice. That's the only way the building will have power."

## ON THE WEB

The best-seller lists from the current Times Book Review, and weekly book reviews since 1994, are available from The New York Times on America Online. (Keyword: Times). Weekday and Sunday book reviews since 1980 — along with an expanded best-seller list, this week's Book Review, special features, first chapters and audio readings — are available from The New York Times on the Web: [www.nytimes.com/books](http://www.nytimes.com/books)



Learning to appreciate their heritage: a seminar in 1969 on black literature at the Afro-American Society at Cornell University.

# A Call to Protect Academic Integrity

Continued From First Arts Page

cluded content about African-Americans, they viewed the scholar's task — and his gift to the broader culture — as contributing to a political progress by establishing the worth of black culture in the court of academic and public opinion.

In truth, the ideal of wholly disinterested scholarship — in any field of research — will probably remain an elusive one. But it's one thing to acknowledge the political valence of even the "purest" scholarship; it's another demand of its immediate political utility. The ideal of knowledge for its own sake — what Robert Lynd called the "blackomic dogma" — may be unfeasible, and even unrealistic; but it should command our respect all the same.

For it remains the basic rationale of the university. The scholar who analyzes the 19th-century slave narrative and its relation to the sentimental novel shouldn't feel guilty because his research isn't directly aiding the cause of distributive justice.

But scholars are citizens, too, and if it is wrongheaded to demand political payoff from basic research, it would be equally untenable to demand that research be quantified from the real-world considerations that weigh so heavily upon us. Elsewhere, I've called for departments of African-American Studies to join with historically black colleges and universities to establish sophomore and junior-year summer internships for community development (through organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. and the Children's Defense Fund) to combat teen-age pregnancy, so-called black-on-black homicide and the transmission of H.I.V.

Let those who would enlist the academy in the cause of activism

must confront the awkward fact that the political views of academics can no more be regimented than their scholarly opinions. In the socialist tradition, thoughtful work on the political economy of black America has been done by such scholars as Gerald Horne, Adolph Reed and Manning Marable, who urge us to rethink the basic institutions of Western liberal democracy. In a conservative

## Against trying to regiment the politics of scholars.

vein, such black scholars as Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams have argued that the problems of black America must be addressed primarily through voluntarist means. Obviously, both positions cannot be correct, but you can't gauge their validity by the relative compassion or commitment of their proponents. Policy disputes must be subjected to intellectual analysis, performed without a thumb on the scale. And it would be bitterly ironic if a field that was founded upon a protest against exclusion should itself become fearful of pluralism, either intellectual and political.

A typically vanguardist form of scholarly vanity is, of course, to suppose that we have a unique purchase on political wisdom, beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. Yet in the case of African-American studies, the yearning for political potency is altogether understandable. Even as the academic field has become institutionalized, black America continues to suffer massive inequities that

are the legacy of historical racism. To complicate the picture further, black America has itself become enormously fissured, with a widening abyss between a growing middle class and an increasingly isolated underclass. Unfortunately, many of our conventional traditional modes of analysis simply fail to engage the vexing nature of these class differentials. "People don't care what you know," a street slogan has it, "until they know that you care." But genuine progress will depend not just on caring more, but on knowing more.

Public policy issues can indeed be a central concern of African-American studies, as they are at Harvard, the University of Michigan, U.C.L.A., Columbia and elsewhere. They raise conundrums as challenging as any you'll find in the academy. Thirty years ago, no one predicted the current class divide in black America; and this class divide insistently raises questions to which there are still no satisfactory answers. How do we put our people to work? How do we expand the black working- and middle classes? How do structural and behavioral causes of poverty interact and how can they be defeated?

These are among the pressing issues that public policy scholars must address if they are to generate the new analyses and policy recommendations we desperately need. But the crisis of black America can't be willed away by commitment alone. On the level of policy of practical politics, it demands empirical and analytical rigor: in short, the stringencies of the academic dogma.

As W. E. B. Du Bois, himself, a committed African-American scholar, once wrote of the world by thought and brain and plan.

# A Plea That Scholars Take Action

Continued From First Arts Page

transform their lives and the entire society. Scholars have an obligation not just to interpret, but to act.

The classical black intellectual tradition that has developed over more than a century reflected these general tenets and included overtly political goals. W. E. B. Du Bois was not only a great sociologist and historian, but also the co-founder of the N.A.A.C.P. and the "father of Pan-Africanism." C. L. R. James was also intimately involved in black anticolonial movements in Africa and the Caribbean. Even more conservative scholars like the sociologist Charles S. Johnson actively used their scholarship in the effort to dismantle Jim Crow segregation.

The now-classic texts in black studies written before the 1980's were largely produced either outside the academy or at segregated, all-black colleges. These earlier scholars, like Du Bois, understood that critical research into the heart of black life and arts culture had to be interdisciplinary. The tools of black studies scholarship could not be narrowly confined to the traditional academic approaches set by Euro-American intellectuals.

If black studies is to continue its development as a theoretically rich, interdisciplinary field, it must continually challenge itself to understand contemporary black America. That means interpreting the new social, economic, cultural and global forces at work that are rapidly restructuring African-American com-

munities, as well as Africa and the black diaspora.

Most contemporary socio-economic problems confronting black America cannot adequately be addressed by using the traditional racial strategies of "integration" or "separatism," which have dominated black political discourse for more than a century. Integrationist leaders successfully fought against racial segregation a generation ago, creating an expanded black middle class. But the

## Beyond the old categories of integration or separatism.

affluence and accomplishments of this new "talented tenth," produced in part by affirmative action, may have diverted our attention from the current crises of class inequality and poverty experienced by millions of other African-Americans.

The opposite approach of group separatism, characterized by Gaysan spyvess as "identitarianism," encloses African-Americans within the narrow boundaries of their own experiences. The deeply conservative, patriarchal separatism represented by Louis Farrakhan, among others, represents a political dead end. Racial fundamentalism pushes oppressed minorities into an intellectu-

al and political ghetto.

A new paradigm is required, one that would involve scholars, seek to substantially transform the society that perpetuates black inequality. This new approach must reach out, in particular, to the young generation of black Americans born after the end of the civil rights movement, who are increasingly under assault by the forces of unemployment, imprisonment and social isolation.

Black studies has begun to integrate the critical perspectives of class, gender and sexuality into its major projects. However, too many black studies programs have a tendency to focus largely on the arts and humanities, with little attention to political economy, public policy and urban ethnography. This literary and cultural studies orientation should be balanced by a greater emphasis on social science.

But perhaps the greatest challenge for African-American studies is not only theoretical, but political: how to reduce or eliminate the destructive consequences of institutional racism and inequality in a liberal democratic state?

This is no longer just an American question. Brazil, South Africa and other nations are also exploring the complex relationships between racial identities, inequality and power. We need a black scholarship that recognizes that the way we think about "race" is changing because of the rapidly growing Latino, Asian, Pacific Island and Caribbean minority communities. "Races" are not fixed categories. Thus, an oppressed racial minority in one historical peri-



Protesters like the student at left helped bring about black studies at many colleges. Above, W. E. B. Du Bois, historian, sociologist and co-founder of the N.A.A.C.P.



Protesters like the student at left helped bring about black studies at many colleges. Above, W. E. B. Du Bois, historian, sociologist and co-founder of the N.A.A.C.P.

"think tanks," bringing scholars together with representatives of civil rights, labor, women's and poor-people's organizations to develop public policy initiatives.

That is why many black scholars have joined feminists, labor and community activists to develop the Black Radical Congress, a grassroots political organization created to revitalize the black freedom movement. We can only advance our field of scholarship by reaffirming the connections between the intellectual work and public advocacy of Du Bois, James, Paul Robeson and many others who established and developed black studies.

## THINK TANK

### Covering Their Eyes With Parted Fingers

The New York Times asked a handful of scholars for comment on the apparent ambivalence of much of the country about the sexual accusations against President Clinton.

News programs cover the issue constantly and receive high ratings just when many Americans insist that the matter should be private. Here are excerpts from their answers, compiled by Janny Scott:

"People's responses are dominated by a combination of deep absurdity and intense fascination. We feel something unreal and strange is happening. I think Americans feel that they're in a bizarre realm that suggests that there is something wrong with our political culture and something has become unhinged in the structures by which we ordinarily balance personal life, family life, politics, social existence.

"Having said that, the same people who have a sense of this absurdity are nonetheless fascinated by it. But fascination can have many sources. Of course, the usual ones are very novel here. It is an ongoing narrative, and of course it's got a sexual dimension, which is always fascinating; and it's got dimensions of power. But maybe the deeper fascination is with American political self-destructiveness in playing out this mad

game. We're fascinated by the very combination of absurdity and danger.

"It reminds me of the way we sometimes speak of technology going berserk as 'identitarianism.' I call it 'the vanishing truth paradox.' The public wants to have great leaders, and we use whatever media we have to try to create greatness. We've used television now, our dominant medium. The paradox is that greatness only exists at a distance. So the more closely we watch our leaders and the more continuously we watch them, the less great they appear to be. There is a kind of sinking feeling. That person is not good, let's find someone else.

"None of our famous leaders — Washington, Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt — could have sustained this level of attention. First,



we just thought we had a lot of lousy leaders — Johnson, Nixon, Ford. But I think some of this ambivalence goes back to the fact that the public is starting to realize that you can't watch people this closely.

"I also think there has been a shift in the culture, because of television, that journalists have adapted to a shift from 'résumé criteria' to 'dating criteria.' We always used to have two sets of criteria for decisions in life. We would not choose a lover or a friend based on a writing sample or a résumé; but it was never the case until television that you would consider somebody viable Presidential candidate because of the twinkle in his eye.

make them creeps or hypocrites. Human beings are complex creatures. They may be watching this with one hand over their eyes. They may say, 'this is terrible and I don't like knowing this, but everybody else knows it so I don't want to be out of the loop.' They may regret the invasion of private life while at the same time finding themselves lured in, as we would be by any great drama. So I don't think it's fair to be outraged by the condition that people are two-faced. A more generous view would be to say that they're human."

— Jay Rosen Professor of Journalism New York University

"I'll confess I despise Bill Clinton and have for a long time. I can't get enough of this and my wife is disgusted with me. She doesn't like Bill Clinton, but she thinks it's a weakness of soul, as it undoubtedly is. I have to confess that I want to dance around Bill Clinton's grave. And it's a weakness.

"The question is, what should be the proper object of pleasure? Rather than reading about Bill Clinton's difficulties, I ought to take pleasure in, and I do, reading and thinking about Lincoln's Gettysburg address. I ought to look at a beautiful picture. I ought to listen to a beautiful music. So, the question really is, in what should we take pleasure?"

— Walter Bers Emeritus professor of government Georgetown University