

Since the last issue of ASA News the Association has had to respond to growing external and internal challenges that threaten both the integrity and freedom of the research community it serves and represents and the viability of its administrative structure and the services it provides to that community. These matters are so serious that we felt a joint statement from the current president, past president and vice president was in order.

The external threat comes from an increasing assault on the academy in the wake of the national security concerns that have followed the attacks of September 11, 2001. This threat has occasioned the new “Guidelines of the African Studies Association for Members’ Ethical Conduct in Research and Other Professional Undertakings in Africa” and the Resolution on the Study of Africa After 9/11 that were both unanimously passed by the Board of Directors of the ASA. The Guidelines and the Resolution are printed elsewhere in this issue, and we urge all members to read them carefully.

The growing preoccupation with homeland security has encouraged a variety of extremist political groups to attack dissenting opinion in the academic community and to pressure government for legislation to increasingly align academic programs with government policy. The issue over the renewal of the Title VI legislation and its funding of area studies centers and language programs has been renewed in the House of Representatives with the introduction in February of HR 509, a bill putting forward again the text of HR 3077. On June 17, however, the House Select Education Subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Patrick Tiberi (R-OH) reported unanimously to the full committee HR 509, which modifies the original HR 3077 text. While the new bill moderates the text of the earlier bill in some areas, it retains the proposal for a politically appointed review board. For example, instead of providing for the Secretary of Education to appoint two members of the review board from government agencies with “national security” responsibilities, the new version now allows these members to come from agencies with responsibilities for “diplomacy, international commerce or other international activity” and adds persons with expertise in “international business” to the non-government members of the board. The review board, however, remains independent and unaccountable in its operations and functions. Before the bill was unanimously reported from sub-committee, Rep. Christopher Von Hollen (D-MD) noted his support for bi-partisan improvements to the bill but also noted that the board represented a potential threat to academic freedom and said that he did not see the need for a political watchdog or another bureaucracy. The question remains whether these issues will be addressed in the hearings before the full committee and in the version of the bill sent to the House.

Even more directly threatening to the ASA and to all of its members is the growing number of covert government programs of graduate fellowships and research grants for study in Africa. The very secrecy of these grants, whose recipients are not required to disclose the source of their funding and the results of whose research can be classified and restricted for use only in government intelligence agencies, threatens to create a clandestine network of scholars operating as national security agents within the heart of the academy. The opportunity this provides for domestic spying, particularly on those who dissent from current government policies with regard to those nations and regions of Africa that are the focus of their scholarly expertise, has a truly sinister potential for limiting academic freedom and free expression in our universities to a degree unknown since the witch hunts of Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s. Equally important, since knowledge of the existence of these covert programs, if not of their individual recipients, is rapidly spreading throughout the world, the honesty and integrity of all scholars from American universities is being seriously undermined. We are now all likely to be suspect of harboring hidden agendas within whatever research that we are conducting, in whatever discipline and about whatever historical period. It is for this reason that the ASA Board Resolution reaffirms “the African Studies Association’s long-standing policy of support for the open and transparent determination of research priorities and awards.” Secret participation in such research programs constitutes a serious breach of research ethics and a clear case of academic research misconduct.

The internal challenge that the Association is confronting is a significant shortfall in income to support staff, publications, the Annual Meeting and other services. This situation was mentioned in President Bruce Berman’s letter in the January/April 2005 issue of ASA News. The letter focused on the losses incurred by free riders who attend annual meetings without paying membership dues and/or conference registration fees. In the ensuing months it has become clearer that the Association is facing a revenue shortfall in its annual budget. To deal with this shortage, the Association has limited options. We could, as has occurred in the past, dip into the endowment to meet current expenses, but this leads down the road to eventual bankruptcy in about five years, given that costs will only increase in the future. The other alternatives are significant annual increases in membership and registration fees and/or reducing membership services to cut down on costs, for example, limiting the number of issues per year of the Association’s publications. The latter instance would mean that we would all get less for more.

There is, however, another and best case scenario that benefits both the Association and the membership. The completion of the computer database of all current and past members revealed intermittent membership to a degree that surprised us all. While the membership of the Association has never risen above approximately 2,000 individuals at any given point in time, the database actually contains more than 7,000 names, of which nearly 5,600 have a valid email address. The only explanation for such a discrepancy is that many people adopt a pattern of “strategic membership,” joining the Association and paying their fees only in occasional years in which they want to present a paper or organize a panel at the Annual Meeting. As of June 20, 2005 the Association actually had only 1400 paid up individual members for the current membership year.

The practices of free riding and sporadic membership have potentially catastrophic consequences for the Association. However, a paid up membership numbering 3,000 or more individuals that more accurately reflects the size of the Africanist scholarly community that the Association serves would not only resolve the current financial distress of the ASA and pay for publications and services but probably would also permit us to continue the current levels of membership and meeting fees. We therefore appeal as urgently as we can to all who permit their membership to lapse periodically or who avail themselves of the Association’s services without payment to meet our mutual vital professional responsibility of supporting the presence of Africa in the academy, maintain the ASA’s important contacts with Africa, and foster networking among Africanists of all disciplines and backgrounds through Association meetings and publications by rejoining immediately. We also urge that all members ensure that their college or university libraries and African studies centers and programs maintain institutional memberships in the ASA. In so doing, we take collective responsibility for sustaining the Association that arranges for the presentation of our papers and panels, provides the social arena for meeting our friends and colleagues, links us to publishers, helps defend our academic freedoms, and serves as the central focus of African studies for the international community of Africanists. It’s a win-win proposition for us all.

Bruce J. Berman, Joseph C. Miller, Sandra T. Barnes
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