

The Thomas W. Lambeth Lecture

---

*Remaking America:  
Higher Education and  
Civic Engagement*

**AMBASSADOR JAMES A. JOSEPH**

*Sanford School of Public Policy  
Duke University*

---

**September 17, 2009**

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

The Thomas Willis Lambeth Lecture in  
Public Policy is sponsored and published in  
association with the Department of Public Policy,  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
CB# 3435 Abernethy Hall  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3435.

© **James A. Joseph 2009.**  
All Rights Reserved.  
Do not quote or copy without  
express permission of the author.  
**Final version for publication,**  
**December 11, 2009.**

*Lecture and publication costs are supported by the generous gift of an anonymous donor.*

JAMES A. JOSEPH

*Remaking  
America: Higher  
Education and  
Civic Engagement*

## Remaking America: Higher Education and Civic Engagement

Let me say what a delight it is to join you in paying tribute to my good friend Tom Lambeth. I am also honored to have been invited to deliver this lecture in his name, following in the footsteps of our mutual friends Joel Fleishman and Hodding Carter. I first met Tom Lambeth when I was President of the Council on Foundations and he served with distinction as a member of the board of directors. While Council members came from every state, five continents and every form of organized giving, there was always a special connection to North Carolina. It was my great privilege to work, first, with Terry Sanford when I was a young, brash and sometimes rebellious board member of the Council; and later, when I became President and CEO and assumed the responsibility for putting some of my ideas into practice, I was privileged to have the advice and counsel of Joel Fleishman, Bill Bondurant and, of course, Tom Lambeth. Each provided very special leadership in the work of the Council to promote responsible and effective philanthropy, but it was from Tom that I learned about the University of North Carolina and his passion and, I might add, even his partisanship for his alma mater.

I learned not only about the role of this great university in the public life of North Carolina, but there was even a time when I tried to schedule a Council board meeting early enough to permit Tom to watch his favorite basketball team in the NCAA finals. What you might be surprised to learn, however, is that while Tom is definitely a UNC partisan, I would not likely be at "that university" some of your associates love to hate if Tom had not joined with Joel Fleishman to persuade me that nothing could be finer than living in North Carolina. Tom was so devoted to this state that he was willing to overlook my indiscretion about where I worked as long as my wife and I were willing to accept his advice about where we should live.

It would be easy for me to focus this lecture on the challenges and opportunities of organized philanthropy, an area in which Tom and I worked closely for many years, but Tom's interest and his contributions have been so broad that I have decided to speak about another one of the passions

we share in common. It is a passion that is a central part of the mission of this university and a much discussed subject among universities across the country. So given the setting and purpose of this lecture, I have decided to speak about remaking America: the role of the university in public life.

The historian Arthur Schlesinger once wrote that the United States is neither fixed nor final. We are a nation, he said, that is always in the making. The question for us today then is what role our universities should play in the remaking of America, indeed, in the remaking of our world.

In 1963, Clark Kerr, the President of the University of California, sought to answer that question for his time in a speech to an enthusiastic audience at Harvard in which he extolled the virtues of what he called "the modern American multiversity." He said, "It has few peers in the preservation, dissemination and examination of the eternal truths; no living peers in the search for new knowledge; and no peers in all history among institutions of higher learning in serving so many of the segments of an advancing civilization."

I want to be a little more modest today in what I propose to say about the civic responsibilities of the university, because it was only a few years after Clark Kerr's speech that the smell of tear gas pervaded his campus and students on more than 100 campuses engaged in protest of the ends their institutions chose to serve. As Derek Bok, the former Harvard President, wrote some years later, "What these students were questioning, in short, was nothing less than the moral basis of the university and the proper nature of its social responsibilities."

While there were excesses in both the rhetoric and ranks of many of my students in the sixties, let us not forget that while there is a new vocabulary and, indeed, new vehicles for student engagement, many of these students in the sixties also sought to learn and serve simultaneously. My students at the Claremont Colleges in California were not only working hard academically, but they were working hard in the community and registering black voters in

Mississippi and Alabama; they were working in the local Latino community and building community centers in Africa and Asia. While public attention was on the Vietnam War, little attention was given to the other war on campus, the intense debates that exposed many colleges and universities as quiet enclaves isolated from their communities and having little impact on the outside world. It is thus fitting and appropriate that we use Tom Lambeth's advocacy and support for civic engagement as an opportunity to examine the role of the university in public life.

The questions I would like to examine are these: 1) What role should higher education play in developing, nurturing and sustaining the civic values that lead to civic engagement; 2) What do we need to know and teach about the modern idea of civil society, especially the civic habits and traditions of the new population groups who are changing our civic culture; and 3) what can we do to help define and develop civic engagement as a form of strategic intervention in public life rather than simply community service that provides charitable relief?

What I am suggesting is that there should be three components to what we teach and how we promote or facilitate civic engagement. The first has to do with civic values, the idea that our notion of civic responsibility must include moral responsibility. The second has to do with civic knowledge, the idea that we need more research and a better understanding of the social capital of the new population groups that are literally remaking the American society. The third has to do with civic habits, the idea that there are many unexamined, under-developed options for contributing to the public good. This encapsulates civic engagement into three powerful metaphors: being, knowing and doing.

## *Civic Values*

Let me begin with the being or values component, and make the point that both the private behavior of the individual and the welfare of the group are grounded in moral principles and should be a part of what we teach and try to inculcate as civic values. I have been living and working in South Africa full or part time for the last fourteen years and I have been struck by the fact that the public discourse in the United States about public values has been primarily about the micro-ethics of individual behavior, the private virtues that build character; while the South African conversation has been primarily about the macro-ethics of their aggregate existence, the public values that build community.

We need to be very clear about what civic values we need to cultivate. For too long, many of those who teach ethics have focused on the private virtues that build character to the exclusion of the public values that build community. It may be that what we need most at this unique moment of free-floating anxiety is to help both our students and our society understand how best to think about, and how best to apply, values to public life without getting caught up in the politics of virtue or the parochialism of dogma.

Reinhold Niebuhr was in many ways ahead of his time when he published the book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in the 1930s, but he had it right when he wrote that we know a lot about how to apply values to our individual existence, but very little about how to apply them to our aggregate existence, whether national, cultural or communal.

Many in South Africa have been seeking to build a new society based on a concept of community called ubuntu, which is best expressed by the Khosa proverb “People are people through other people.” It is this powerful sense of shared interdependence that spawned the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation that literally stunned the world. It was the ability of people like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu to say that your pain is my pain that allowed them to say that if your humanity is assaulted, my humanity is assaulted; if your dignity is denied, my dignity is denied. It was not I think, therefore, I am. It was I am human because I belong. I participate; I share because I am made for community.

What does it mean to speak of values that build community in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time? A few years ago, we were all concerned that the more interdependent we were becoming, the more people were turning inward to smaller communities of meaning and memory. While some saw this as reason for despair, it may be that the emphasis on remembering and even the practice of regrouping were a necessary stage of the search for common ground. As I travel around the world, I still hear people saying that until there is respect for their primary community of identity they will find it difficult to embrace the larger community in which they function. We will, thus, find it difficult to form a more perfect union as long as the focus of some of our citizens on the wellbeing of their primary group is called remembering their roots and honoring their heritage while for others it is called identity politics.

The principle in which our idea of community needs to be grounded is one I often cite as providing grounding for my own engagement with those who differ in color or culture. It comes from the African American mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman, who was fond of saying, “I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you.” Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say “I want to be an American without making it difficult for an Arab to be an Arab, an Asian to be an Asian or an African to be an African?” Can you imagine how different our neighborhoods and communities would be if more Christians were able to say “I want to be a Christian without

making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim or a Buddhist to be a Buddhist?”

So how do we build community? Surprisingly, I have come to conclude that it may begin by recognizing and respecting the dignity of difference. Many well-meaning people in many well-intentioned institutions have looked at diversity and sought to homogenize it to fit their comfort zone. They fail to understand that the more diverse we are, the richer our culture becomes, and the more expansive our horizon of possibilities. Jonathon Sacks, the British Rabbi who wrote the book, *The Home We Build Together*, could have been speaking to our universities when he argued that if we were all the same we would have nothing unique to contribute, nor anything to learn from each other. Yet, if we were completely different we could not communicate and if we were exactly alike, we would have nothing to say. So the Rabbi concluded that we need to see our differences as gifts to the common good, for without a compelling sense of the common good, difference spells discord and creates, not music, but noise.

How do we build community? It has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are not only transformed, but they experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was “their” problem becomes “our” problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, getting people to do something for someone else — what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own — is a powerful force in building community. When they experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when they help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when they help to dispel prejudices or speak out against bigotry directed at their neighbor, they are far more likely to find common

ground, and they are likely to find that in serving others they discover the genesis of community. So the moral imperative of civic engagement is to help transform the laissez-faire notion of “live and let live” into the principle of “live and help live.”

## *Civic Knowledge*

This brings us to the second question we need to ask. It is about civic knowledge, what should we know and teach about the modern idea of civil society. Resurrected in the 1970s by the Polish Workers Movement and later in debates about perestroika in the former Soviet Union, the idea of civil society is rooted in three very different visions of public life. The first was the idea of civil society as government. Civility, for Aristotle, described the requirements of citizenship rather than private sensibilities or good manners. It was organized around the face-to-face relations of friends whose leisurely aristocratic benevolence enabled them to discover, articulate and promote the public good.

The second was the idea of civil society transforming government, often in opposition to government. I was standing on the edge of a crowd in the former Soviet Union when an upstart named Boris Yeltsen made his first speech calling for major social reform. I was standing in the middle of a crowd outside of Parliament in Cape Town when F.W. deKlerk announced that Nelson Mandela would be released from prison and the African National Congress unbanned. On each occasion, people spoke of the rebellion of civil society against the state, but they did not so much want to replace the state as to transform it.

The third idea of civil society has been the notion of civil society transcending government. Unlike the private sector driven by the market and the public sector

driven by the ballot, the so-called third sector is driven by something deeper and nobler, a spirit of compassion and commitment to the common good. It is in many ways the conscience of the other two sectors. It is even possible to argue that since civil society preceded government, it may be more appropriate to think of it as the first sector.

The attractiveness of the concept lies in its conjoining of private and public good. But in what should be its finest hour, the idea of civil society is in danger of being distorted and hijacked by those who emphasize its potential in order to bolster arguments for a more limited social role by government. Some of the strongest advocates of civic engagement are people with an uncivil state of mind.

While it is clear that it was people power that led to the collapse of communism, the dismantling of apartheid and even the fall of the Berlin Wall, there are now those who exaggerate the potential of civil society in order to bolster their claim that government should have a more limited social role. Those of us who understandably and necessarily emphasize the potential of civil society have a responsibility also to point to its limits.

It is also important to remember that civil society includes more than simply the non-governmental organizations that serve a public good. As Thomas Carothers reminded us in a *Foreign Policy* magazine article some years ago, civil society everywhere is a bewildering array of the good, the bad and the bizarre. The hate groups that have used the Internet to become transnational and the criminals who operate across national borders are only a few of the groups that use the civic space between the state and the market for less than noble purposes. There are new civic groups that have caused observers to proclaim that hate is back. The truth is that it never fully went away. What is back is the social acceptance of public displays of hate. While free speech is a cherished American value, those of us who worked in Alabama in the sixties learned that violent rhetoric can have violent consequences. In short, civil society carries the potential to re-shape and unite a divided world, but we must guard against overselling its strength, over-

romanticizing its intentions or over-protecting unacceptable social behavior.

My second concern about civic knowledge, what we know and teach about civil society and civic values, has to do with the many ways in which new population groups are changing the American civic culture. Alexis deTocqueville, Robert Bellah and others have painted wonderful pictures of what they described as “the habits of the heart” of the American people. Unfortunately, however, neither deTocqueville nor Bellah included in their reporting and analysis the extent to which voluntary activity and civil society in racial minority communities served as a vehicle for self-help, social cohesion and positive group identity.

I spent fourteen years as President of the Council on Foundations where I was a spokesperson for benevolent wealth, and I cringed every time I heard some new guru on civil society speak of American voluntarism or American generosity as if it was somehow unique to those citizens who trace their ancestry back to Europe. Very disappointed in what I kept hearing, I began the research for the book I published in 1995 on the civic traditions of America’s racial minorities. What I found were remarkable manifestations of civic feeling that in many instances pre-dated, but were consistent with, the civic habits practiced and the civic values affirmed by the larger society.

As early as 1598, and long before Cesar Chavez started organizing farm workers, Latinos in the Southwest formed “mutualistas” and lay brotherhoods to assist members with their basic needs. Long before de Tocqueville, Benjamin Franklin became so enamored of the political and civic culture of the Native Americans he met in Pennsylvania that he advised delegates to the Albany Congress in 1754 to emulate the civic habits of the Iroquois.

Long before Martin Luther King wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” or gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, African Americans in the 19th century formed so many voluntary groups and mutual aid societies that some Southern states enacted laws banning black voluntary activity or charitable organizations. Long before Robert Putnam published his first article on social capital, Neo-

Confucians in the Chinese community were teaching their children that a community without benevolence invites its own destruction.

The point I am making is that it is no longer possible to speak of the American civic culture without reference to and respect for the varied traditions that are now shaping our civic life. People around the world are coming to realize that a good society depends as much on the goodness of individuals as it does on the soundness of government and the fairness of laws. They are reclaiming responsibility for their lives through neighborhood associations in squatter settlements, farming cooperatives in rural areas, micro-enterprises in urban areas, housing associations, mutual aid associations, and various other forms of self-help groups to improve local conditions.

Our students who work abroad must be taught to respect local traditions, local cultures and local concepts of community. While not as well organized and not as well supported as in the United States, the idea of helping neighbors in need, the idea of service to others as an essential part of the pursuit of happiness, can be found in many countries and communities.

President Clinton appointed me chair of the Corporation for National and Community Service, so I was involved in the development of AmeriCorps; but I was also involved in the launch of City Year South Africa, a private mobilization of student volunteers in the mold of Americorps, and it is clear to me that it would be both arrogant and plain wrong for anyone to approach the promotion of community service in that country as though it was a Western value rather than a shared value. The absence of a well organized service movement does not necessarily mean the absence of a service ethic. What we Americans can bring is experience in how to mobilize and even how to motivate, experience in how to communicate an existing ethic and how to coordinate existing energy. But there is much we can learn about the service ethic that comes out of the notion of ubuntu, for example.

## *Civic Habits*

When we come now to my final concern, what I have called civic habits, the idea that we tend to promote a rather limited approach to civic engagement. It is not enough simply to provide incentives for students, there must be incentives to unleash the research capacity of the university as well. On many campuses there is an institutional culture that seems to regard practical investigation into practical community needs as the “dumbing down” of research. Too many of our faculty colleagues tend to regard those who teach about civil society and encourage civic engagement, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s phrase, as “practitioners of an obscure art.”

We might as well face the facts. A university, like many other institutions, is often what it rewards. I have found in both my private and public life, whether in business, government or education, that an institution is not so much what it says in its values statement, its recruitment brochure or its press releases as it is what it rewards its people for being. If civic engagement is an important institutional priority, there need to be both guidelines and incentives that reflect what the institution claims as its values.

I have been pleased to see in recent years, that there are universities and colleges that get it, institutions that have actually tied academic incentives to community outreach. At one, for example, it was decided that in order to unleash and successfully encourage faculty to do research that connected to the challenges facing its community, the institution would have to re-think what it rewards. A faculty committee developed, and the university accepted, a definition and guidelines for university outreach scholarship that was tied to the promotion and tenure system.

I have also been pleased to see the recommendations of the University of North Carolina Tomorrow Commission and the emphasis on the three-pronged

mission of teaching, research and scholarship, and public service. I hope that together we can make it clear, however, that the civic engagement of students is not simply a good thing for them to do in personal development but an essential element of cognitive development in the complex, interrelated and rapidly changing environment of the 21st century. While it is useful to think of civic engagement as knowledge in the service of society, if it is to enjoy the status and standing that it deserves it must be seen also as society in the service of knowledge.

A second point about the civic habits of universities has to do with the limitation of civic engagement to badly needed service and helpful charity. We are told with frequency that the world would be better off if more of us worked in soup kitchens, delivered meals to the elderly poor or tutored kids who are at risk. That is a noble form of civic engagement, but it is ameliorating consequences while the university may be best at helping to eliminate causes. Like Thoreau in Walden Pond, many community organizations build castles in the sky and then seek to put foundations under them. The university can provide intellectual capital to help them transform their passion into persuasive evidence. We can help clarify the distinction between long-term strategic intervention and short-term charity.

My third point about civic habits is that the university can help to inform and enrich the public policy process. I know that many institutions are advised by their donors and legal counsel that it is unwise, illegal or too risky to get involved in public policy, but I served on the U.S. Treasury Department's Task Force that struggled with how to distinguish between permissible advocacy and impermissible lobbying, and I can tell you that there is much that can be done by institutions of higher education to objectively inform and influence policy.

The most often cited example of charitable relief is the story of the Good Samaritan. We are told that a traveler finds someone badly beaten along the side of the road and stops to help. Suppose that same man traveled the same road every day for a week and each day he found someone badly beaten at the same spot on the road. Compassion requires that he give aid, but eventually compassion

requires that he ask, “Who has responsibility for policing the road?” What started out as an individual act of charitable aid leads to a concern with public policy. The first response, as was the case of the hurricane disaster on the Gulf, is to ameliorate consequences, but the second response must necessarily be aimed at eliminating causes. One is charity. The other is strategic civic engagement. Civic engagement has often been most effective when it has dared to go beyond charity, when it has helped provide both understanding and meaning to the social problems that trouble us.

The civic habits of the university should also include investing in the empowerment of those who are economically and socially marginalized. The university can help educate its publics, both locally and nationally, on the policies and practices needed to make our society work for all of its citizens, but it is not enough simply to be advocates who speak in behalf of the marginalized groups in our communities; we must help empower them to speak for themselves. If racism was the original American sin, the persistence of paternalism may be its most enduring counterpart.

We have all too often asked the wrong question in dealing with those in our communities whom we seek to help. We have been asking what can we do about their predicament or what can we do for them when we should have been asking what can we do together. Self-help is a principle all groups admire and often desire, but too many people assume it means that those disadvantaged by condition or color should be able to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, even when they have no boots. I like the concept of assisted self-reliance or participatory empowerment where the affected groups provide leadership but they are supported by intellectual capital and fiscal resources from others outside the group.

Let me, thus, conclude by making the point that when universities seek to involve students and faculty meaningfully in their communities, they must understand that how they are engaged is as important as in what they are engaged. There is a story told about the exit of the British from one of their former colonies.

On the day on which colonial officials departed, the Governor General was heard to say, “When we came here these people had few roads, few hospitals and few schools. We built new roads. We built new hospitals and we built new schools, but now they show no appreciation. Why?” A peasant, on hearing this conversation, interrupted to say, “It is easy to understand, Your Honor. Every time you look at us you have the wrong look in your eyes.” Civic engagement aimed at eliminating poverty or advancing equity must begin first with a look at the policies and practices of our own institutions. Unless those who represent them have the right look in their eyes, their efforts will not only be in vain, but if left unattended could damage the institution’s image, diminish its influence, and defer the dreams of those who gave birth to the vision they now seek to advance.

Finally, I like to think of civic engagement as providing hope as well as help. So in the end, the challenge for our universities is to train and promote graduates who are purveyors of hope; leaders who can look beyond what they see and imagine alternative possibilities. It is the kind of hope Vaclav Havel had in mind when he said, “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything ends well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that everything ends badly. But I could not accomplish anything if I did not have hope within me, for the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.” Civic engagement may set out to provide help, but, if it carefully considers what civic values, what civic knowledge and what civic habits it should affirm, it may also provide hope. And the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.

## Biography



James A. Joseph served as ambassador to South Africa from 1996 to 1999, and was the only U.S. ambassador to present his credentials to President Nelson Mandela. He is now Professor of the Practice of Public Policy Studies at Duke, where he has launched the U.S. - Southern Africa Center for Leadership and Public Values to help emerging leaders in southern Africa contribute to the development and reconstruction of their countries and the region. Ambassador Joseph is the recipient of the Order of Good

Hope, the highest honor the Republic of South Africa bestows on a citizen of another country, and of many honorary degrees. A Louisiana native, he is a former civil rights activist in Alabama and author of two books, *The Charitable Impulse* (1989) and *Remaking America* (1995). He is now at work on a book that focuses on ethics in public life.

## *Thomas Willis Lambeth*



The Lambeth Lecture honors Thomas Willis Lambeth, who led the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation as its executive director for more than two decades until his retirement in 2000. Born in Clayton, North Carolina, Lambeth graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1957 with a bachelor's degree in history, and served as Administrative Assistant to Governor Terry Sanford and to U.S. Representative Richardson Preyer before being named to lead the Foundation in 1978. Described by one journalist as “the

state's do-gooder-in-chief,” Lambeth throughout his career has exemplified the qualities of personal integrity, a passionate devotion to education, democracy, and civic engagement, and wholehearted pursuit of the ideals of the public good and of progressive and innovative ways of achieving it.

During his tenure, the Reynolds Foundation awarded grants totaling more than \$260 million to address many of North Carolina's most pressing public policy issues, particularly social justice and equity, governance and civic engagement, community-building and economic development, education, and protection of the state's natural environment. Tom Lambeth also has made a strong personal impact on many key public policy issues in North Carolina and nationally, including leadership of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, Leadership North Carolina, the North Carolina Rural Center, and a task force of the national Institute of Medicine on the problems of people who lack medical insurance. He also has been a national leader in improving the management and effectiveness of family philanthropic foundations themselves.

*The Thomas  
Willis Lambeth  
Distinguished  
Lecture in  
Public Policy*

The Lambeth Lecture was established in 2006 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill by the generous gift of an anonymous donor. Presented annually, its purpose is to bring to the UNC campus distinguished speakers who are practitioners or scholars of public policy, particularly those whose work touches on the fields of education, ethics, democratic institutions, and civic engagement. The lecture is administered by the Lambeth Lectureship Committee composed of faculty members, students, and distinguished individuals engaged in public policy, in collaboration with the Department of Public Policy.



UNC  
COLLEGE OF  
ARTS & SCIENCES