
Remarks on the 75th Anniversary of the ACLS

by Frederick Burkhardt, ACLS President Emeritus

Stan Katz has asked me to reminisce briefly on the years I was associated with the ACLS as a member of the Board of Directors and later as President. This assignment has given me the pleasure of reading once again Jere Whiting's wonderfully learned and witty annual reports as delegate to the Medieval Academy, published by the ACLS as *Respectfully and Finally Submitted*. I recommend it to any of you who want a reliable readable account of the years 1948-1975.

I became a member of the Board of Directors of the ACLS in 1950. It was not a happy time for either the ACLS or the humanities. In 1951 we received the alarming news that the single foundation that still supported our program was making a terminal grant. The objective of this action was, in the perhaps unintentionally double-edged words of the accompanying letter, to encourage the ACLS "to achieve independence from a single source of support."

Jere Whiting in his report was moved by this action to quote a little ditty that went: "Perhaps you were right to dissemble your love/But why did you kick me downstairs?"

The years that followed were chiefly concerned with an attempt to create a wider understanding of the plight of the humanities and the need for an organization like the ACLS.

In 1955 Howard Mumford Jones became Chairman of the Board. His first act was to send an appeal to the constituent societies about the critical situation, and in June 1955 the Board created a Commission on the Humanities to survey the entire field and to make recommendations concerning the needs of the humanities and the role of the ACLS. It was the work of this Commission that was largely responsible for the turning of the tide. So this is a good occasion to celebrate the contribution of the two leaders of that work that convinced the foundations that there was indeed a role for the ACLS: Howard Jones and Whitney ("Mike") Oates, and of the two men who recognized the need for a rejuvenated ACLS: MacNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation and James Perkins of the Carnegie Corporation.

At the 1957 Annual Meeting Howard Jones announced a five year grant of \$2,600,000 from Ford and \$300,000 from Carnegie to provide funds for fellowships, grants-in-aid, and special projects, among which was a program of \$10,000 tax-free prize awards to distinguished scholars. I am happy to be able to tell you that one of 50 scholars selected for an award was today's Haskins Lecturer, Robert K. Merton.

Nineteen hundred and fifty-seven was the year I had the honor to be elected president. It was also, you may remember, the year of Sputnik.

Sputnik frightened this country into action—action that resulted in tremendous initiatives in science and education in order to keep up with or surpass the Soviets.

World War II had already made it clear that we were a country ignorant of other cultures, and woefully deficient in their languages. The National Defense Education Act was enacted, and a grant to the ACLS came from the Office of Education to study the need for persons trained in foreign languages. We also obtained funds for a program in Uralic-Altaic language studies, with 68 projects in 25 languages. John Lotz, who drew up the application, made a map showing that the countries that spoke these languages encircled the Soviet Union from Finland, Hungary, through the Turkic speaking countries of central Asia to Korea.

The years that followed were years of great expansion in our international program. The ACLS participated with the Social Science Research Council in 10 joint committees to advance multi-disciplinary research in area studies. In 1959, when the United States signed an agreement for cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union, the ACLS immediately sought to make arrangements for the exchanges in the humanities and social sciences, but it took until 1961 to get the first modest exchange in motion.




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The American Council of Learned Societies was founded in 1919. It is a private non-profit federation of fifty-four national scholarly organizations. The purpose of the Council, as set forth in its constitution, is "the advancement of humanistic studies and the maintenance and strengthening of relations among the national societies devoted to such studies." The Council, consisting of a fifteen-member Board of Directors and one Delegate from each of the constituent societies, meets annually.

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In 1960-1961 we launched an American Studies Program with a grant from the Ford Foundation. Its objective was to set up chairs in American Studies abroad and to bring scholars from abroad to do research in American history, literature, and other fields at universities in this country.

In the Spring of 1963 a Commission on the Humanities was set up under the aegis of ACLS, Phi Beta Kappa, and the Council of Graduate Schools. After a year of work the Commission issued a report on the state of the humanities, culminating in the recommendation that a National Humanities Foundation be established. Another year was spent in convincing the Administration and Congress, and in September 1965 the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities was signed into law.

In 1966 a Committee for Scholarly Communication with Mainland China was established by the National Academy of Science, SSRC, and ACLS, but all efforts to establish communications were rebuffed until after Henry Kissinger's secret visit was revealed in July 1967. Something of the difficulty we faced may be inferred from the single communication I received when I invited the Academy of Science of Peking to participate in an international conference on Taoism. I quote a few excerpts:

"Dear Mr. Burkhardt:

We the Chinese people are very dubious about your purpose and intention. . . . At present the People's Republic of China has only Mao Tse-tung thought. All other sects are big poisonous weeds. . . . The aggressive ambitions and schemes of the United States can never be concealed before the devil-finding mirror of Mao Tse-tung thought. Here we solemnly warn you that if you dare to play any schemes and tricks, we will certainly smash your dog head. . . .

(signed) Red Guard Team in Academy of Science Peking."

It occurs to me that our Secretary of State might be interested in a copy of this letter, since he is looking for signs of improvement in Chinese relations.

In 1968-1969 our 50th anniversary was celebrated by a capital fund-raising campaign, which reached its goal of a \$5 million endowment.

By 1973, the strength of the Council had grown from 25 constituent societies to 40, and over 80 universities, colleges, and research libraries contributed to the support of the Council as Associates of the ACLS.

I have left out a great many things: our efforts to improve the humanities in secondary school education, IREX, the Universities Service Centre in Hong Kong, our study of scholarly publication, the committee on information technology, and dozens of other ventures, all supported by grants from public and private foundations. By 1973 the ACLS annual budget had increased ten-fold to over \$10 million.

When I retired in that year, my successor, Bob Lumiansky, wrote a preface to his first Annual Report in which he generously gave credit to me and the ACLS staff for these accomplishments. But he neglected to point out that during most of the years since 1957 he had been Chairman of the Board, and a good part of the growth of the Council was due to his efforts. He was a great initiator, with a fine sense of timing. He seemed to know when the time was ripe for the National Endowment and when a capital campaign would be feasible and went after them with great energy. He carried this initiative through the years of his presidency. When he retired (for the second time) he had been an active force for strengthening the ACLS and the humanities for over 30 of the 75 years we celebrate today. It gives me great pleasure to be able to join in recognizing his great contribution to making the ACLS the vital organization it has become. □