“Exploring Democratic Ideals” is the Aurora Forum’s guiding theme. With this in mind, we aim to promote the democratic ideal of open citizen participation and deliberation in a context of legally guaranteed individual rights. Here we intend to create a commons where people gather to examine and explore issues and ideas that concern the shape of our communities and the quality of our day-to-day lives. Tonight we will consider especially the rights and responsibilities of citizens and journalists with regard to deliberative inquiry, truth telling, and the kind of principled disagreement that makes democratic government possible. –Mark Gonnerman, Aurora Forum Director

**Professor Karlan:** Thank you all for coming. I’m looking forward to the discussion both between us and with the audience. The subtitle of Mr. Lapham’s book, *Gag Rule,* is *On the Suppression of Dissent and the Stifling of Democracy,* and much of the book is taken up with a discussion of how the government has suppressed speech recently and has suppressed dissent, but I want to start with the “stifling of democracy” part of the book, because one of the things that I was most struck by when I read it was the way in which you talk about how we collaborate in our own lack of dissent and democracy by not learning how to think in the first place. I wonder if we could talk a little bit about what ought to be done to help people think more critically. Where is the problem?

**Mr. Lapham:** Well, they ought to practice and talk out loud. Dissent in critical thinking is like a muscle that atrophies unless you put it to use. So whether you do that in conversation with your friends, whether you do that by attempting to run for or stand for political office, no matter how local, whether it’s school board or sewer district or county supervisor or planning commissioner, or whatever level is closest to hand…and then to write and to take seriously and to try to answer seriously what the other person says. Democracy is like this forum: face-to-face. It’s about learning from each other. Democracy assumes that the answer to no question is final and that every 20 or 30 years the old order, whether it is of men or of institutions or of fortunes or of matinee idols, will be carried offstage. And the assumption is that we all are engaged in a mutual enterprise and therefore we all have need of each other, whatever point of view we may happen to bring or in whichever generation we find ourselves.

**Karlan:** One of the things that is so striking is that people don’t learn how to do that thinking. It’s one thing to say that we should practice dissent once we know how to do it…and the critique in the book, for example, of public education and what people are
taught there suggests it would be great to run for office when you get to be an adult, but people get to be an adult without ever learning how to think in a critical way or to argue.

Lapham: Well, also we don’t teach it in our schools. You know—having been to Yale—that Yale was founded in 1701 with the purpose of preening magistrates and preachers. Essentially, that was its purpose—in other words, to add to the store of public information, discernment, and virtue. That was the purpose of the university, and that was the purpose for its first 200 years. And that was the purpose of the land grant colleges that were established all across the United States in the nineteenth century. It was to add to the common store of knowledge, and also teach the notion of citizenship. I’m old enough to remember, say, 40 years ago when the word “public” connoted something good: public servant, public health, public school; and the word “private” tended to connote something selfish and greedy: private railroad car, private fishing pond, and so on. Those meanings have been reversed in the last 30-odd years. “Public” now usually connotes corruption, fraud, incompetence, and slums, and “private” connotes all things true and beautiful and trout streams in the Colorado mountains owned by the Coors Brewing Company. Democracy—self-government—is a collective enterprise, and I have read exam papers given to eighth-grade students in public schools in Kansas and Oklahoma in the late nineteenth century, in the 1880s and 1890s, that no graduate of either Harvard or Yale could come close to passing, not only in terms of geography, but in terms of the uses of grammar, in terms of astronomy, and so on. The questions required a good deal of knowledge on the part of the student. When the West was settled and gradually came toward California in the nineteenth century, usually the first thing a town wanted to do was to hire a school teacher, to find someone—usually a woman—but either a man or a woman who could improve the intellectual health and welfare of the people in that town.

Karlan: It sometimes seems that people just don’t know any of that history.

Lapham: We don’t teach that history anymore. When I say “we,” I don’t know. I went as a young student to a nursery school, the Peninsula School in Menlo Park, and I can remember at the age of four at the Peninsula School playing the part of a Pilgrim first arriving in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and I was a tiny child but I had a big, tall hat, and I was very proud of that hat. I can remember being taught the American story in school, not only in grammar school in San Francisco, but also in college. What we have in common is a story. It’s not blood, it’s not nationality; the thing that makes us American is our agreement to take part in the same story to which we pledged our sacred honor.

Karlan: That’s one of the things that interested me so much about the book: the way in which it’s a story of the cyclical rising and suppression of dissent. The first gag rule was the gag rule in Congress before the Civil War that stopped any debate about slavery. It was just put on the table; it was not discussed. Then you talk about a series of these gag rules over time, and the more we know about that the less likely we are to put up with it. We no longer really have a discussion of that story, so that now we do the Pilgrims, and then we do something that’s multicultural after the Pilgrims. Now, instead of the
Pilgrims arriving triumphantly, the Pilgrims should be ashamed of themselves when they arrive, and then we move on from there. But we don’t actually discuss the story very much at all anymore. There’s a footnote in the book that’s stunning in the ignorance of people: there was the woman who thought the Holocaust was a Jewish holiday. You just wonder how you can have a conversation with people who know no facts and understand no history.

Lapham: You can’t. It’s very hard to have a conversation with people who know very few facts and not much history. It’s also hard to have coherent politics, something that we could conceive of as an American political identity, unless we know more not only about our own story but also about each other. Dissent simply means thinking for oneself. Archibald MacLeish, who was a Librarian of Congress, a great poet and playwright, and also worked for the Roosevelt administration in the Ministry of Public Information during World War II, said the dissenter is any human being at that moment when he or she, even momentarily, thinks for himself. That’s all it is. It’s thinking for yourself and resigning, according to MacLeish, from the herd. And we need as much of that as we can get. We need to have as many citizens willing to question their own stupidity and fear. We all have stupidity and fear; that’s human nature. But at least to ask questions of it is the nature of the democratic idea. And it goes back further than the Civil War. In the 1790s leading up to the election of Jefferson in 1800, American opinion was very sharply divided between the Federalists, who were by and large Anglophile, and the Republicans, who were by and large Francophile. And the Napoleonic wars were going on in Europe. Both the French and the British are impressing American seamen, are seizing our ships, which is at that time our only source of wealth, and the bitterness in Philadelphia and New York and Boston is such that people are throwing stones at one another. The Republicans are wearing the red, white, and blue cockades of the French Revolution, and the Federalists are wearing the tall black hats associated with the British. It gets so sharp with the disagreement and the accusation that the Adams administration passes the Alien and Sedition Act in 1798 that makes it criminal treason to criticize the President of the United States. And Adams believes that in America what is required is a monarch.

Karlan: In which one King George inherits from the previous King George.

Lapham: Yes. Under the Alien and Sedition Act, a lot of newspaper editors, including the editor of a newspaper that is named The Aurora, from which this forum in part takes its name (the editor of The Aurora in the 1790s was a man named Benjamin Bache, who was the grandson of Benjamin Franklin) would routinely refer to Adams as “His Rotundity,” or he would call him “bald, toothless, quarrelsome, lying fool.” These are the kinds of words that came easily to the journalists of the late eighteenth century.

Karlan: Let me press you a little on this, because one of the things that is striking is the robustness of the language in the 1790s. I like the robustness. You know, Rush Limbaugh sounds just like that. The robustness then was tied much more tightly to some real argument of fundamental substance. Today we still have this sort of language that’s quite similar. It’s not that the language invective has changed very much; it just doesn’t
seem to be tied to any underlying political philosophy or any real substantive
disagreement that’s out in the open the way that the difference between the Federalists
and the anti-Federalists—the Republicans—was tied to the turn of the eighteenth century
to the nineteenth century.

Lapham: It [the invective] was tied to very different theories of government. And
again, it’s close; it’s up front and personal because the offices of The Aurora on Market
Street in Philadelphia were two blocks from the White House, which was at that time also
on Market Street in Philadelphia. So these people see each other every day in the street.
This is not lobbing adjectives into a radio microphone from a distance of 3,000 miles.
These people know each other and mean what they say. Democracy is, as I say, face-to-
face. It’s like a courtroom.

Karlan: Part of your criticism of the media in your book is that today they are too face-
to-face with the White House—that they go to the same parties, they start out as media
flacks, and so on, and so it’s not that they’re not still face-to-face. You talk about the
media now being educated—“a courtier’s education” is the phrase you use—and that it is
different in some way from what you’re celebrating about the very vigorous debate of the
eighteenth century.

Lapham: It’s a different kind of face-to-face, because in a democratic face to face at the
end of the 1790s, there’s an argument. But the media today does not argue with power.
The idea of a White House correspondent actually arguing with the President of the
United States is inconceivable. Our White House correspondents today, our mainstream
major journalists, are figures more accurately described as the Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern figures from Hamlet. They are bearers of messages. They hope to be
invited to be embedded in the war against Iraq. There is no independent mind. These are
servants of power.

Karlan: That “embedded” word is such a striking word. I should say about the book
that it’s a work of astonishingly easy erudition—the way you switch back and forth. One
of the things you don’t cite anywhere in the book that I was struck by is the George
Orwell politics and the English language essay, which seems to tie in so closely to a lot of
what you’re getting at. He would say that a word like “embedded,” instead of saying “in
bed with,” which makes it clearer what’s going on, is a sort of euphemistic way of hiding
a really essential truth. So much of the discussion that you talk about is a way of hiding
essential truths rather than confronting them.

Lapham: That’s right. So much of the language of our own media and our own debate
is euphemism. And it’s a form of political correctness. We are trying to find a language
that is risk-averse, salt-free, and baby-soft.

Karlan: One of the other things that I thought was really striking that comes through the
book and comes through also in your discussion about the importance of knowing history
is the extent to which so much of what we’re seeing today has striking parallels in the
past. And one of the things that struck me most in the book was a quotation from
Thucydides about the Athenians’ decision to go into this disastrous invasion of Sicily in 415 as part of the Peloponnesian War. You read that and you think it sounds exactly like what’s happening today and it reminds you that America has moved from the position of being a democracy to the position in some ways of being an empire with all of the baggage that that carries. Is it possible to reclaim America as a democratic republic or are we inevitably sliding into empire and the problems that empires have bred—endless occupation of places far away in wars that are hard to explain either to ourselves or to anyone else in which they are constantly shifting, wars in which we no longer have a citizen army, which is one of most striking differences I think you see between, for example, 1945 and today? We don’t have a citizen army anymore and, indeed, if we had a citizen army, it might not be lodged mostly in another country right now.

Lapham: Right. Again, the lessons of history to me are endlessly fascinating. You refer to the debate in Athens before the disastrous Athenian invasion of Syracuse, and there’s a debate, there’s an argument, between Alcibiades, the rash general who sounds very much like George Bush, and the general Nicias, who is suggesting that this is a fool’s errand. And the evidence is based on exiles from Syracuse, who are very much like Ahmed Chalabi. They are liars. So Athens gets together the greatest fleet that has ever been seen at that point in all of known history and it sails to its destruction.

Karlan: They thought it was going to be a fast invasion. They had no idea what was going to happen in the first round of what I guess you’d say was trench warfare in some ways.

Lapham: But it was like the glorious march through Havana, if you remember, that the CIA was going to stage for us at the Bay of Pigs. Then I have the example of my own ancestor. My great-grandmother’s grandfather was a man named Henry Dearborn. Henry Dearborn was the Secretary of War in both Jefferson administrations. Then, at the age of 65, in 1809, Madison was elected and Dearborn gets the greatest gift of patronage at the hand of the federal government; he’s made the collector of customs in the port of Boston. He establishes himself in a tavern two blocks from the docks and he sits at the tavern and in the middle of the table he has an upturned top hat into which arriving and departing ship captains place tokens of their appreciation and esteem. This is a wonderful thing for the old general, and he spends three years at the table with a warming pot of rum and the upturned top hat until the awful day arrives in June of 1812. A messenger arrives from Madison in Washington, and appoints Dearborn Commander in Chief of the American army. Paragraph two instructs him to march north and take Canada by September 6. This is the War of 1812, which was as stupidly declared as the invasion of Iraq. The trouble with the first paragraph was that although Dearborn is appointed Commander in Chief of the American army, there is no American army. There are various state militias, and it was thought that Canada would fall easily. There were something like three or four million people in the United States and only 500,000 in Canada—and where was the argument? Well, in the long and stately procession of bad and incompetent American generals, Dearborn stands very close to the head of the list. There was no skirmish in which he appeared that he didn’t lose. By September 6, Canada
was supposed to be an American possession and also the Canadians were supposed to meet the invading Americans with flowers….

Karlan:  …in September in Canada.

Lapham: Yes. Happy to be liberated from the British crown. This, of course, was just as foolish as the expectation in Havana in 1961 and the expectation in Baghdad last year. Finally, Dearborn, in February of 1813, manages to get 3,000 New York State militia on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River facing Montreal. And he draws his sword and gives the order to steer for victory in Montreal. Nobody moves. No waving of hats, no cheers, no stampeding anxiety to get into the boats. And finally a captain steps forward and says, “General, there are four points that you might wish to consider: One, it is very cold and a bad day for boating; two, the people on the other side of the river have guns; three, the people on the other side of the river are our friends and they are the people with whom we trade and on whom we depend for our livelihood; four, we’re not members of the United States Army, we are members of the New York State militia and we have no quarrel with Canada. In a word, General, we’re not going. You, however, are welcome to cross at your leisure, and should you wish to do so, goodbye, good luck, and God speed.” The general appreciated the wisdom in all four points, turned smartly around, pointed his sword at Boston, resigned his commission, and returned to the upturned top hat and the warming pot of rum. My point is there have always been people who would add the dream of empire, and it came to Washington again in 1821. There was a group of people in Congress who wanted to send the U.S. Navy, which at that point consisted of four frigates, to the west coast of South America to seize Peru and Chile from the vicious Spanish viceroy and liberate the people. It was the same kind of uproar and enthusiasm in Congress that was there….

Karlan: Look what they had to do. The lesson I draw from the story of your ancestor is that it used to be that the government was dependent on the real assent of people who were going to bear the costs to do these kinds of things. He can’t lead because the troops feel that they have a mind of their own and say, “We’re not going.” Today we don’t have a citizen army, we have an army of people who were fooled into joining in large part by being told, “Join the army and get a college education.” They weren’t told, “Join the army and get your legs blown off in Iraq.” It’s an army made up of people who are the least fortunate, the least privileged, who have no connection in some way to the people in Congress. One of the most striking things… I think one member of the entire Congress has a child serving on active duty in either Iraq or Afghanistan, and that’s a really different way of organizing the politics of the country from what we had when it was the New York militia and they weren’t going to go unless they thought it was a good idea. Now people go because they’re ordered to go and there’s no discussion of what would be a good idea.

Lapham: That means we’re getting far away from the notion of the republic, which is the notion the founders had in their minds. And the historical example, of course, is the first century B.C. in Rome, when you go from essentially a citizen army where the men of quality, affluence, standing, and rank in the society also had to fight in the wars; they
were also the generals and the commanding officers. And then it goes to, of course, mercenary armies and the legions, and that’s the end of the republic. It hasn’t happened yet here, but we’re a long way from the notion of the democracy of the republic that the founders had in mind. And you have to remember that the United States has now been, for all intents and purposes, at war for 60 years. We are a war economy. It began with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and carried through the Second World War with then the long, extended period of the Cold War and Vietnam, and now the never-ending war on terror. Two weeks after September 11, Rumsfeld went in front of a microphone and said that the war on terror would last for 40 years. Because as a stop in the mouth of a quarrelsome press or a restive electorate, nothing works as well as the lollipop of a foreign war. This is a dodge known to the Egyptians. There’s nothing new in this strategy, but that’s where we are, and to a large extent the Spanish-American War was declared on Cuba in order to suppress what was then the Populist movement in the United States. It was about shutting down domestic discontent by diverting attention to the excitement of the Spanish-American War. And much of the same language was being used. The Spanish colonels on the island of Cuba were identified as the greatest villains that had ever walked the earth. They were said to be throwing peasants to sharks, roasting nuns over coals. They were described in the same language that we describe Saddam Hussein. Then, of course, we took over the island for our own commercial interests. On the grounds of liberating the Cuban people, we sent embassies from Washington to write the Cuban constitution, which made Cuba subject to the will of the American sugar interests.

Karlan: We now find ourselves imprisoning in Guantanamo the people we captured in Afghanistan because we still own part of Cuba.

Lapham: The shutting down of dissent in World War I: We get into World War I in April of 1917, and in June of 1917 we pass the Espionage Act, which again, like the Alien and Sedition Act, makes it a crime to criticize the President of the United States. Magazines were closed down—which hasn’t happened yet under the Patriot Act. It went to such an extent that an early Hollywood producer had coming out in release in the summer of 1917 a movie called *The American Revolution*. And it was a Mel Gibson sort of early D. W. Griffith film, but because he was telling the heroic story of the American Revolution, the redcoats were the villains, the enemy. But because at that point in time we are now allies with England in the Great War in Europe, he [the producer] was sent to prison for five years for criticizing our ally, Great Britain, a monarchy. We had no business being in World War I, and in 1914, 80 percent of the American people had no interest in getting into that war; but the propaganda machine of the Wilson administration rivals the propaganda machine of the Bush administration. The Karl Rove of the day was a man named George Creel, who was the director of propaganda for the Wilson White House, and he’s the guy who came up with the notion of what we now call the Canon of Great Books. I don’t know if you teach those at Stanford, but the canon of Western civilization—you know, Western Civ., the course—was invented by Creel as a propaganda device in order to produce in the American army being sent to Europe what he called “thinking bayonets.” He wanted them to believe that they were fighting for something other than the commercial interests of the New York banks.
Karlan: That’s so interesting, because if you actually read those books you might end up being a dissenter. It’s not that the canon forces people into some kind of monolithic thinking.

Lapham: No, it doesn’t. If you read them carefully, you actually end up as a…

Karlan: …end up as you.

Lapham: …or you, or anybody else in this room.

Karlan: I want to turn to one other point that I was struck by in the book before we open this up to questions from the audience. The epigraph at the beginning of the book is from Judge Learned Hand, and he says, “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.” That comes from a naturalization speech he gave on July 4, 1944, in the middle of World War II. One of the things that’s striking is what he says right after that in the speech. As he describes the spirit of liberty, he says, “It’s the spirit that’s not too sure that it is right,” and then he says it’s “a spirit that seems to understand the minds of other men and women,” it’s “a spirit that weighs their interests alongside its own without bias. The spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded.” Here’s the part that I find really striking right now. He says that “the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who near 2,000 years ago taught mankind that lesson it has never learned but has never quite forgotten, that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.” One of the things that strikes me about that as a liberal and as someone who is Jewish is that today, religion in public life is used as a conservative force. Generally; it’s not used as a force that liberals talk about, as, for example, they did during the civil rights movement. It’s not used as a force for redistribution. It’s a kind of “pick and choose”—what Garrison Keillor calls “Christianity of convenience.” Religion is sort of absent from your book, except in the discussions of some of the early dissenters who were motivated by religion. What has happened to religion in American public life and its role in encouraging people to dissent when they see injustice?

Lapham: I think it’s a reversal. The dominant intellectual gestalt in the United States in 1944 is liberal. It comes out of the Roosevelt New Deal, out of the ‘30s, so that in 1950 you can have somebody like Lionel Trilling actually saying that the spirit of America is liberal and there really is no conservatism. Conservatism is not, and I’m quoting, “is nothing else except irritable mental gestures.” That’s Trilling in 1950, and in 1954, you have Galbraith saying the same kind of thing. And the dominant consensus, whether you’re in the universities, whether you’re in the foundation world, whether it’s Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, is a liberal bias consensus. And the church, as I understand the history—and you may know it better—is also liberal. It’s preachers in the mode of Sloane Coffin or the Berrigan brothers. You find the church identifying with the dispossessed, trying to lead the way not only to salvation in heaven but a better life here on earth. It’s Schweitzer in Africa....
Karlan: It’s Martin Luther King.

Lapham: It’s Martin Luther King, it’s Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany. And then the shift to the Southern Baptists, and Jerry Falwell, who makes the alliance with the conservative side in 1977 when he becomes part of the right-wing, think-tank crowd in Washington. His Moral Majority was formed, I think, in about 1977. Then you see the church—at least what we think of as the church (and there are still a great many Protestant and Catholic and certainly Jewish religious in New England, which is the part of the country I’m familiar with)—to be very much of the liberal spirit. So that when you’re talking about religion in our current political sense, you’re thinking of Ralph Reed, maybe, and the Christian Right....

Karlan: ...and the way in which conservatism has managed to appropriate all the public symbols of religion, [that gave rise to] the argument over having the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Religious liberal people took the position that they were very offended by the argument the government was making, which was that putting the words in doesn’t mean very much; it’s just our civic religion. And they said, No, either take this seriously or take it out, and we think it has to be taken out because we have such disagreements. But all of these symbols have been appropriated by conservatives so that it creates the same kind of diversions you talk about with the war, which is that wars are designed to divert people from injustice at home, and religion has been turned into something to divert people from discussions of economic and social justice of all kinds and to treating religion as if it’s only about the Pledge of Allegiance or only about abortion and not about any of the other things that religion actually has to give people.

Lapham: It’s the bait and switch. In other words, it’s the substitution of questions of character for questions of politics. Politics addresses itself not to the soul; politics is not about the soul, politics is about the state, it’s about the society, it’s about our obligation to one another as citizens. It’s not about whether I’m good or whether gay marriage is evil or whether abortion is bad. It’s not got to do with those kinds of values. And the great switch of conservatism—the Republican right or the Christian right or the various combinations of right over the last 20 or 30 years—has managed to substitute the questions of moral value for political service. The great statement of that is by Machiavelli. Machiavelli made a very clear distinction between what he called the city of the state and the city of the soul, and the two things had nothing to do with each other. There were different orders of judgment, and—you would know better than I—but I think, if I understand correctly what the framers of the Constitution had in mind when they were trying to separate state from religion, they were afraid of the damage that religion could do to the state more than they were afraid of the damage that the state could do to religion, because these were people who were familiar with 200 years of bloody religious war in Europe. I am of a very secular point of mind, and the idea of trying to mix religion with politics I find to be very bad news. We have an attorney general who had himself anointed in the manner of David in the temple. He didn’t have the same oil that was available lo these many years ago, so he used Crisco. It was smeared on his head by Justice Thomas in order to have a religious anointment at the same time as he had a secular swearing-in. And I find that very troubling.
**Karlan:** I, too, am troubled by that.

I want to give the audience a chance to get in on the discussion, so I hope that people who have questions will go to one of the two microphones so that everyone else can hear you as well. You should feel free to distribute yourselves between the microphones.

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**Question from the audience:** Can the United States gain some understanding of Afghanistan and Iraq from its history with the Philippines and Cuba?

**Karlan:** I think the question ties in a little bit with your general methodological point, which is that understanding the history of our relationship with other nations that we’ve been involved with may give us some insight into how we deal with Afghanistan or Iraq. So is there some way in which, for example, the United States’ relationship with the Philippines, starting with the Spanish-American War leading up through World War II, might shed some light on Iraq?

**Lapham:** We occupied the Philippines as a result of the Spanish-American War. It was a brutal occupation. We attempted to impose our rule and to shut down the Philippine insurgents because after the Spanish were displaced, then there was a Philippine insurgency that was trying to establish their own state, their own government, and we suppressed that and killed close to 10,000. Finally, we gave up on the Philippines because we’re not good at occupying foreign countries. We’ve demonstrated that many times. There was a very fine debate in the year 1900 in Madison Square Garden between Mark Twain, who was the president of the Anti-Imperialist League, and the best-selling author of 1900 in the United States, the young Winston Churchill, who was 23 and had just written a book about his adventures in the Boer War in Africa. This is the whole argument—liberal vs, conservative—over the attitude toward empire, which I wish somebody today could make as eloquently as Twain made it in 1900.

**Question from the audience:** You have mentioned a whole series of historical conflicts that this country has been involved in in the last 200 years. You specifically talk about the last 60 years starting with Pearl Harbor and including the Cold War, the current situation [in Iraq], and the possibility that we may be in a conflict for potentially a generation into the future. My question is, do you see any situation where this country would be involved in a morally justified war or do you believe that any conflict that we are involved in has fundamentally an immoral basis?

**Lapham:** I think war tends to be immoral, but you can say that some wars are necessary. Certainly World War II: we were attacked by the Japanese; we fought, I think, for a just and necessary cause in both the Pacific and in Europe. I don’t think we can avoid wars. In 1821, John Adams, as Secretary of State when the enthusiasts in Washington wanted to invade Latin America, said, “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. We might end as being a dictatrice of the world but we would lose our own
spirit.” And I think we would. I don’t believe in fighting preventive wars. I don’t believe in the doctrine of preemptive strike and forward deterrent or forward self-defense. In other words, I think the Bush doctrine is foolish and self-defeating. I don’t think that we are the Roman Empire. Yes, there are wars that we would have no choice but to fight, but not Iraq.

**Question from the audience:** Before the invasion of Iraq, I think about 70 percent of Americans supported the invasion in public polls, and even now, I think a slight majority supports it. So will it take a military draft to change those statistics?

**Lapham:** I would support the notion of a military draft. I think that if America wants to play the part of an empire, I think that we should be prepared to send our own sons and daughters and not depend upon a mercenary army. Pamela made this point earlier. That would be consistent. If we say to ourselves, “All right, we are the Roman Empire,” or “We are the British Empire,” then have a draft.

**Karlan:** It’s so striking. The current leadership consists of people who themselves, when offered the opportunity to go personally to war, chose not to do it. The Vice President’s line was something like, he had other career priorities at the time—like being alive to run for Vice President.

**Lapham:** Well, he filed five deferments, and he said he couldn’t afford to go to war in Vietnam because he “had to make money.” That’s a direct quote from the young Cheney. I find the whole notion of American empire a very specious one because at one point, Bush will say, We are at the moment of maximum danger and you have to be very, very scared and hide under the bed; don’t go near the Washington Monument; avoid airplanes. Then, ten minutes later, he’ll say, Go shopping. Nobody is required to make any sacrifice—none of the citizenry. So the sacrifice falls on our military volunteers, mercenaries, and on our National Guard. And it also, of course, falls on us as citizens in what is not being spent on schools, roads, job training, the economy, the environment, and so on. It is being sunk into the sand of Mesopotamia—$200 billion to date.

**Question from the audience:** Thank you for your conversation. I’m still stuck on Professor Karlan’s first question about how we can get people to engage in critical thinking in democracy now. If we have an administration working on improving public education, maybe 15 years out we can start to have an electorate that could engage in democracy. But how can we practice skills we haven’t acquired in the absence of the factual and historical materials that we need—I guess this would happen ideally within the next five weeks—especially in the face of the anti-intellectualism in our culture and propaganda that purports to be these facts and historical materials?

**Lapham:** Again, I go back to something that Ralph Nader said in the campaign of 2000. He said that if 100,000 Americans would give $100 and 100 hours, the changes that we could make would be astonishing. It’s the time. There may be some of us in this room who could become a senator or become the president of the United States or secretary of state. But for most of us, the political act is local. That’s what Nader means by the 100
hours and the $100. There are any number of avenues into the political system. There 
are 87,000 political jurisdiction bodies in the United States. It’s amazing what you could 
get into if you were interested in them. And to expect the media to tell you what to do or 
to even tell you the truth is a very romantic expectation. The news media is sculpture in 
snow; it’s the best that can be done in the time allowed, which is either a few minutes or a 
few hours to write a newspaper story or to put together a television broadcast. To expect 
that for no money, which is what CBS News costs once you’ve paid for the television set, 
that you’re going to be given sexual sensation, accurate weather reports, and the truth, is 
a romantic expectation. The media tells stories, and some stories are better than others. 
But the notion that they’re going to do the work for you is a mistake. Democratic self-
government is self-government, and it’s your responsibility to learn. You certainly can 
learn. No society makes information more freely available than the United States: 
Library of Congress, trade journals, 75,000 books published a year—many of them not 
very good, but nevertheless, there they are. To perform the duty of a citizen is work, and 
we either decide to do the work or we don’t. And if we don’t, out of our own laziness or 
inattention we will find ourselves with incompetent generals, autocrats, Mussolini. 
Mussolini was a Socialist until 1917, and he edited a newspaper in Milan called Il 
Popolo, and he converted to Fascism in 1917 because he beheld and understood Wilson. 
He attributes his whole switch to Fascism to what he had learned from admiring 
Woodrow Wilson. It’s a fascinating piece of work; it’s historic.

**Question from the audience:** To what extent is the threat of violence by the people 
against the powers of oppressive government necessary to restrain the excesses? In your 
book, you mention that it’s not time yet to storm the palace. Might there come a time?

**Lapham:** Well, there might always come a time. Dissent, of course, is preliminary to 
violence. Dissent is not necessarily revolution. Dissent is simply having the courage to 
say what you think and to hold to your own opinion. The word “Protestant” is protest. 
And many of the people who first came to this country in the seventeenth century were 
Protestant. Protesters. To get to the stage of violence is something else. I don’t think 
dissent and revolution necessarily are synonymous. Jefferson believed and said—I don’t 
know if he believed it or not, but he said it—that the tree of liberty should be watered 
with the blood of revolution every 20 or 30 years. The American Revolution was more 
orderly; it wasn’t like the Russian Revolution. I don’t know where the point comes 
where people revolt. I don’t sense that that is a mood that has yet overtaken the 
American people. The powers that be were afraid of that in the ‘30s. They were afraid 
that would come out of the Depression, and they were to some extent afraid of that in the 
late nineteenth century with the Populist movement and the violent suppressions of labor 
strikes at steel mills, and so on. We can get to that point, and at some point, as the 
Declaration of Independence says, it is your duty to oppose and overthrow governments 
that squash the liberty of the people.

**Question from the audience:** I’m new to the Bay Area; I’ve been here for three years. 
Before I came, I heard a great deal that was stereotypical about Bay Area liberals. I 
found that the stereotype tends to be rather thin. That, in fact, is not the case; there’s a 
great deal of true independent thought here. On the other hand, at one point when the
war broke out, I read in my newspaper that 69 women in Marin County stripped naked on
the beach and spelled the word “peace” with their bodies—a questionable political
statement to me. Group-think doesn’t seem to be monopolized by either the left or the
right. And you used a phrase that I love; you said that dissent is resigning from the herd.
I wonder if you could comment on the tendency that I sometimes see across the
board—in myself, too, I’m sure—to resign from the big herd just so you can sign up for a
small herd.

Lapham: Well, the temptation is very great. Small herds are much more fun than big
herds. You actually get to meet a better class of buffalo, or sheep. But we all do that.
It’s hard to think for yourself, and there’s a lot of weight and convention against it. The
great democratic argument, I think, is the argument between the inertia of things as they
are, and on the other hand, the energy in the hope of things as they might become. That
is always a difficult argument. That argument has been going on in the United States. I
think that is what democracy is: it’s that argument. And sometimes it’s more intense than
others. And sometimes the status quo—the heavy weight—is always on the side of Time
magazine and The David Letterman Show and the Pentagon. And it’s the new idea or the
unconventional idea, the discovery, whether it’s made by twinks or those kinds of
people—the makers of the earth after God. He [MacLeish] was talking about not only
Thomas Paine, who was the engineer who built the first iron suspension bridge—Thomas
Paine is in the engineering hall of fame—or Edison or Franklin or those people. Dissent
is never easy, and nobody can do it all the time. So while waiting for the lightning to
strike, you can take comfort in the small herd…under a eucalyptus tree.

Question from the audience: I have a continuation from a couple of questions ago. I’d
also like to voice my minor dissent with the characterization of an uneducated military,
myself being a citizen soldier, pulling degrees from Princeton and this institution. I also
wish that the California militia, now the California National Guard, had the current power
to keep us out of wars. It would have made my last couple of years a little easier.

The current system has civilians in charge of the military. The soldiers aren’t necessarily
civilians, but the elected officials are, and we’ve demonstrated that about 50 percent of
the nation likes to elect those who get us into wars. You talked in answer to the last
question about acting locally, empowering people to think for themselves. But how does
one actually start that when 50 percent or more in this country don’t seem to want to?

Lapham: Well, I don’t know that they don’t want to, when you think that there are very
few pleasures in the world that come up to the use of the creative intelligence—just using
it constructively, learning something. Most everybody likes to do that. But as a country,
we spend probably $800 billion a year in the war against the intellect—that’s television,
drugs, pornography. The use of the mind is fun, but there are a lot of things working
against it, and one thing is a bad education. The way we teach in schools—the books that
we give students—is often amazingly dull. If somebody asked me what is the national
security, I would say it isn’t the military, it’s our own intelligence, and then health. And
that’s where the money ought to go. I think that much more can be done than we’re
doing, and I don’t say it’s impossible at all. I just say we’re not working hard enough at it.

**Question from the Audience:** In your book, you touch extensively on the previous attempts by the United States government to extend its power to suppress dissent. You also devote considerable time to mentioning our educational system and the electronic media, and so on. If almost seems as if you are critiquing an entire culture more than just the actions of one administration.

**Lapham:** I am. I’m not just blaming the Bush administration. The Bush administration is an outgrowth of the evolution of the American political idea in this society over the last 50 years.

**Question from the Audience (continuation):** Given all these obstacles against the development of creative thought, can a nation founded on drugs and pornography and television and a shoddy school system endure?

**Lapham:** If it gets its act together, yes. And it *can* get its act together. In other words, those kinds of things are not permanent.

**Question from the Audience (continuation):** So things are not insurmountable?

**Lapham:** They’re not insurmountable, no.

**Question from the Audience:** My question has to do with the last statement made, that it’s not insurmountable. I was hoping Professor Karlan can answer this. I’ve always kept very current on what is going on, and the last several years have been really depressing because dissent has been suppressed and democracy, or what I thought of as democracy, has been stripped away in many cases. There are people in power who have this conservative religious view that they’re embracing. How do you have hope when the people in power don’t represent what you think of as democracy and when the people in power might be in power for another four years? How do you have hope, or how should I have hope?

**Karlan:** This is one of the places where I think history is such a powerful teacher. You learn all these terrible things that happened in history, but you also learn that there has been a lot of positive change. So if you think about the speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave at the end of the Selma to Montgomery March, he said that one of the things that we know is that the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.

**Question from the Audience (continuation):** What if you can’t see that?

**Karlan:** That’s one of the reasons to remember history. Life is long, and four years, even in the development of a country, is not forever.
Question from the Audience (continuation): It seems as though there’s been a lot of damage in those four years.

Karlan: Absolutely, I think there’s been a lot of damage. But on the other hand, you can take a long view and realize that a lot of the struggles that led to the things that we think are best in America took years and years and years. If you think about from the time the Supreme Court announced in Plessy that “separate but equal” was fine under the Constitution, even to the point at which the Supreme Court was prepared to say, No, that’s a bad idea, it was 60 years. If we think how long did it take from then to get to a civil rights act that actually enfranchised any substantial number of black Americans, it was another 12 years. How long after that until there was actually some real representation on state and local governments? Probably another 10 years after that. I couldn’t bear to think that the world is getting worse and worse and worse….

Question from the Audience: Not the world, but the United States.

Karlan: There you have it. If I can suggest one thing that might be kind of inspirational in an odd way to read, just after 9/11, I read something that really struck me. There’s a sermon that C. S. Lewis gave the first weekend of the Second World War. He gave a sermon at St. Mary’s Church in Oxford in which he talked about some of the things that people ought to do during wartime. He said that people need to learn and they need to think, and he talked about one of the reasons this is so important: That when you know something about history and the like, you’re not as likely to be deceived by what’s going on today, and you learn in some way to become immune to “the great cataract of nonsense” that is coming out of the press and the microphone of your own age. I find a lot of refuge and hope in history, because things get worse but things also get better. I know that sounds like something that Chauncey Gardner would say, but I actually think it’s true. To my mind, things are getting worse in a lot of ways right now, but things will get better. Is that too foolishly optimistic?

Lapham: I don’t think so. It’s a matter of your taking action of some kind, as I say.

Question from the Audience (continuation): But if I do one thing of action and John Ashcroft does one thing, his actions are more far-reaching than mine.

Lapham: Not necessarily.

Karlan: If you take one of his actions as he puts little skirts on the statues, and one of your actions is teaching some child how to read and think, that action of yours will have more effect than that action of his. So some of his actions will have more effect, and some of your actions will have more effect.

Question from the Audience: I have a friend who majored in journalism and decided to leave that and go into history, but at times I would discuss some of the ideals of that discipline with him. There seems to be an incongruity in some ways with those ideals and the products of journalists today in a sense that, at least now, there seems to be this
issue of facts—that the sort of factual substrate has crumbled away. I don’t know what journalists are feeding from. The ideals at this point don’t seem to match up. I know that we like to talk abstractly about the big, evil media machine, but nonetheless, there are individual actors and many of them have probably gone to a journalism school where they learned those romantic ideals about finding the facts, telling the people what’s going on, and so on. I’m always on the receiving end of news. How is it that these ideals of journalists who are in the media today, how do they succumb to the…. They join NBC News, and it seems like it’s all kind of fluffy news now. What’s the process? As an editor, for example, are there pressures? How do they “sell out,” so to speak? What’s wrong with the journalists? How do the ideals crumble away?

**Lapham:** The ideals, like many ideals, erode under the weather of experience. If you work for a large news organization, you find out what the limits are. Let’s say you’re working for ABC News. There’s only so much that can get into the space, the time. Then there are certain kinds of stories that will play and others that won’t, and you find out very quickly what the limitations of the form are. Many of the ideals get lost in the commerce of it. They’re trying for a large audience. They’re trying to sell advertising. It is a business. Within those limitations, some places are freer than others. You can probably do more working for the *Times* than you could for a television network. Then you find out if you’re willing to make that bargain, or if your ideals are stronger than that and you’re willing to work for a very small magazine or one that doesn’t pay as much money, or to try to write a novel that may take three years and there’s no money at the end of it, and you do that. There are always the trades, the exchanges to make, and you have to figure out which one is more important to you.

**Question from the Audience:** The question has been almost asked and answered, but not to my satisfaction. I appreciate the sense of optimism you both have. I also appreciate the fact that you take the long view of history. But I wonder how profound at the present time is the danger to the republic in your opinion given the permanent war, the silence of the press, and the changing wealth distribution in the United States?

**Lapham:** I think that the danger is very profound. I agree. I don’t think there’s any doubt about that. But I’d rather think that I can fight against that than give way to despair. That’s all I’m saying. I’m optimistic to that degree, but I’m not a Pollyanna by any means. One of the points of the book [*Gag Rule*] is to try to make clear to people how profound a danger there really is and therefore hope that people will fight against it.

**Karlan:** I think that people are noticing. This goes back to your point about this having been a 50-year process of getting to where we are. If you had written a book like this about the lack of dissent in America and the lack of critical education and the like, and you had come out here at the height of the boom to give the same talk, a lot of the people in the audience here, which is a well-educated, well-informed audience, would not have thought we had a problem and would not have thought that the changing distribution of wealth in the United States was quite the problem that they would notice today. This goes back to Abraham Lincoln’s point that “You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” We’re about to start paying
for a lot of the mistakes we made in a way that will be clear to people when the budget deficit makes it impossible for the government to provide for them what they expected, when people really start to realize what the privatization of Social Security actually means to them and their families, when they start to realize that the absence of funding for higher education means that their kids can’t go to the University of California because there are so many spots being closed down by the California budget. When you start to realize all these things, it changes people’s minds about what’s important. It’s terrible that things have to get worse in that sense to concentrate people’s minds, but I think in some ways they are getting worse in that sense so people are much more aware of the threat than they would have been in 1997 or 1998. Therefore they’re going to be more interested in doing what they can to change things than they would have been. I don’t think anybody today, for example, takes quite the same view that large rooms of people took before the 2000 election. It really made no difference which candidate got elected. Today, people realize it did make a difference which candidate got elected and also which candidate is sitting in the White House, which turned out to be two different things. It’s something that people realize the difference about now in a way that they wouldn’t have five years ago. That gives me at least a little optimism.

**Lapham:** Me, too. Look at the size of this audience. Five years ago, we would have been talking to 12 people, if that.

**Gonnerman:** And we’re very glad that you’ve been here to speak with us tonight, Professor Karlan and Mr. Lapham.

We’ll see you again on September 30 with Cornel West in Memorial Auditorium. Good night.

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Comments?
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