

Niall Ferguson: When I was a little boy growing up in Scotland, there was a television series by Kenneth Clark called *Civilization*. And it was really an art history series. It was mostly spectacular buildings, gothic cathedrals, things like that. I've come to realize as an historian that important as those things are, civilization is about something more profound but less visible than spectacular buildings. We tend to look at the buildings when we're tourists. And so we're quite tempted to think that civilization is the best buildings in the world. In fact, civilization is much more about the best books in the world. Civilization is a set of precepts that are best communicated through books, at least civilization in the modern era; and so when we talk about civilization, we should really be talking as much about libraries as about cathedrals. The difficulty we have, particularly in the 21st century, though it was a problem in the 20th century, too, is in transmitting the great ideas that arose in Western Europe and in the offshoots of Western Europe, to a generation that is increasingly distracted by tweets and blog posts and Snapchats, and Instagrams. So distracted that it can scarcely read a book as long as *War and Peace*. That it can scarcely absorb a single play of Shakespeare's. So our civilization is in much more danger from the compulsive distraction of our time, and from those who would denigrate the great ideas of Western Civilization than it is from any other civilization. I know Sam Huntington, the Harvard political scientist, foresaw a clash of civilizations, and to some extent that's happened. But the real clash is within civilizations. And the clash within our civilization is between those of us who believe in the great ideas of the west, and those who would like to destroy those ideas, and those who just can't find the time to absorb them.

Niall Ferguson: The United States of America is sometimes called with reason the United States of Amnesia, because we are not very good at learning the lessons of the past. Even the institutions of the U.S. government suffer from amnesia, and the mistakes of the 1960s in Vietnam had to be made all over again in Iraq in our time just to give a single example. Why is this? I think it's partly because history has emphasized less and less as a subject of practical volume and has become more and more a vehicle for the transmission of anachronistic accultural ideas. History departments no longer teach what I would call applied history, that is to say things from which one might learn about contemporary problems. More and more history departments teach things that happened in the past of which we should disapprove. The extraordinary number of courses on slavery, it seems to me, bear this out. Those courses have displaced courses on the American Revolution. They've displaced courses on the origins of the First World War. If one looks at the kinds of course on offer at major American colleges to historians, to students wanting to major in history, it's actually rather bewildering because you'll look in vain for some of the big topics, of the history of the west and you'll find instead a kaleidoscope of cultural studies. Now, I'm not hostile to cultural history. On the contrary. I don't regard any branch of history as being inferior to the rest. But I am wary of those who study the past with anachronistic frames of reference. It is not helpful to study the past in order to condescend to it, in order to condemn the racism of those who built empires. That's easy to do. Because you're simply taking your 21st Century value system and imposing it on the people of 200 or 300 years ago. The true student of the past seeks to understand what it was that motivated people to enslave. To colonize. And seeks also to understand what the experience was of those who were the victims of that process. We're not really here to pass judgment and to feel smug about how superior our own value system is. As

history has moved away from what I'll call applied history into a field more like cultural studies, I think it has simply lost appeal for many students. It's a very striking feature of the landscape of American academia that history is a declining subject. Fewer and fewer people turn out for classes on sex, race and class in antebellum Alabama. And that is because at some level these courses are antiquarian. What they offer is not of enormous illuminating power for a student concerned with our contemporary problems. Or, worse, such courses are so preoccupied with contemporary issues of racial discrimination that they cease to be historical altogether. The crisis of history as an academic discipline has real consequences. Because if people pass through universities with an only minimal encounter with history or an encounter with history that is unsatisfying because it's anachronistic or it's simple antiquarian, then how can they possibly have the lessons of history in mind when they come to make decisions whether it's in the realm of politics, of government, or in the realm of business, or in any other realm. We risk producing a history-free generation or worse still a generation that disapproves of history. Because in the past, they didn't just do things differently, they did things wrongly.