Academics have always had a love/hate relationship with politics. They tend to view politicians with haughty disdain and to see politics as suitable only for detached study. And yet, most academics that I know are fascinated by power and influence, which are the essence of politics. The professor jockeying to become department chairman, the scholar trying to outpoint a rival in his field by winning wider support for his work, or the candidate for an important office in a professional association are all political animals. I was asked often after being elected to the Minnesota legislature how I found the transition from the groves of Academe to the hurly-burly of politics. My reply was that nothing went on in the Minnesota legislature that I had not already experienced in meetings of the history department of the University of Minnesota.

All ambitious people, all people with healthy egos, are in the broadest sense political. If we have confidence in ourselves and in our own ideas, we want to maximize our influence to shape events. And that is as it should be. The world has not been changed for the better by quietism. If ambitious people have caused ill in the world, so too have they done good. The most productive politicians have been ambitious; so, too, the most constructive scholars. Both engage in politics as they strive to win acceptance for their ideas. What leads to tension between them is a difference in their perception of the role of politics in their lives.

Let me illustrate. Several years ago, at a time when my university, like many others, was deeply divided over the Vietnam War and student protests, my department split into what we referred to as radical and Tory factions. Although the two factions had approximately equal numerical strength, some of us began to notice that each year, after departmental elections, the Tories controlled the key committees. I drew the obvious conclusion: the Tories must be agreeing on candidates beforehand so as not to dissipate their voting strength. In response, several colleagues and I drew up a radical caucus slate for the key committees and circulated it among sympathetic faculty members. We wiped out the Tories that year. But when
they learned what we had done, they were scandalized. "Slate voting," the leader of the Tory faction said at a departmental meeting, "negates the very concept of the University as a community of scholars. This department," he continued, looking directly at me—the acknowledged ringleader of the coup—"is not the Hennepin County Democratic Party." "But," I replied, "we just did what you've been doing for years. You've had slates too, although you haven't called them that." "Well," he countered, "we've had some discussions among ourselves as to who could best serve the department. But slates? Certainly not."

Scholars, then, play politics like everyone else, but are reluctant to admit it. When confronted with open politicking, they are offended; they prefer to think of their actions as considered, reasoned decision making. This is important to understand when considering the debate that has been waged in recent years over whether universities and professional associations should take positions on political issues. Some have argued that any direct political involvement will compromise the integrity of academic institutions and scholarly bodies, whose only commitment should be a dispassionate commitment to the search for truth. But the failure to take a political position can itself be political. A refusal to support change is, tacitly, a vote of confidence in the status quo. No institution can exist in a political vacuum. The issue for universities and colleges, and for professional associations, is not whether to make political decisions, but what kind of political decisions should be made.

The often divisive battles waged on university campuses during the 1960s clearly illustrate that academic institutions are necessarily involved in politics. University contracts to perform military research, university support for ROTC programs, university decisions to replace low-income housing with new university buildings—the entire range of activities that came under the fire of student protesters—were all the result of political decisions by university administrators. But, as good academics, they never saw them in that way. Decisions to support the government, to bring funds into the university, to build new dormitories or classroom buildings were simply assumed to be proper, responsible decisions. When, on the other hand, student protesters demanded that those decisions be reversed, administrators and their faculty allies argued that to do so would "politicize" the university. In other words, a decision for the status quo was not political, but a decision that would contribute to social change was political.

An even clearer example of this kind of double standard emerged in the early 1970s when many universities were forced to examine their investment decisions. Student and community groups asked universities to vote their proxies against management and for stock-
holder initiatives that would have ended the production of military weapons, stopped practices that endangered the environment, and ended corporate activity in countries that violated basic human rights. Many universities demurred, using the argument once again that they must not take political positions. But for years, universities had been allowing management to vote their proxies in favor of whatever policy management wished to pursue. In fact, the very decision to buy stock in a company that violates environmental or human rights standards, or manufactures anti-personnel weapons, is a decision to support these activities through capital investment. It is a political decision.

The same point, I think, can be made about the debate that has been waged in many of the learned professions about the purpose of scholarship itself. In my field of history, for instance, there have been angry pronouncements in recent years by older, conservative scholars accusing their younger, more radical colleagues of betraying long-established scholarly canons. Attempts to write radical history, they have argued, violate standards of objectivity and distort scholarship for political ends. But all historians, indeed all scholars, bring certain values to their work—the more conservative historians as well as the more radical. Scholars of the 1950s, for example, often celebrated the pragmatic qualities of American society. Their work reflected the political and social values of their time, as does the work of younger scholars who write more critically of American society. All are, in the broadest sense of the word, political.

Archivists have experienced similar controversies. In recent years, socially conscious archivists have made a concerted effort to acquire materials relevant to the history of racial minorities, women, workers, and ordinary people who were neither rich nor powerful nor influential. Archivists have begun to look for new sources in oral history, folk materials, and the artifacts of popular culture. In making these decisions, archivists, like other professionals, are influenced by their own political and social values. So, too, were older archivists whose first priority was to collect the letters and diaries of great white men. What Howard Zinn has written about the task of a historian applies equally to the task of an archivist. To be objective, he maintains,

is as pointless as trying to draw a map that shows everything... No map can show all of the elements [of a] terrain, nor should it, if it is to serve efficiently a present purpose, to take us toward some goal. Therefore, different maps are constructed, depending on the aim of the map-maker. Each map, including what is essential to its purpose, excluding the irrelevant, can be accused of partiality. But it is exactly in being partial that it is most true to its particular present job.
This is not to say that there are no distinctions to be made, no standards to be upheld. Universities, for example, ought not to rush headlong to embrace every social cause that comes along. While some were unreasonably resistant to the concerns of student protesters in the 1960s, some capitulated in ways that genuinely compromised scholarly integrity. For example, some universities, in their haste to correct their longstanding negligence of minorities, established minority studies programs staffed by unqualified people who fashioned curricula of dubious intellectual validity. Their mistake was not in responding to a political demand but in the way they responded. Similarly, some individual scholars who are self-consciously political have produced first-rate work based on intensive research and adherence to the most rigorous scholarly standards; others have written sheer propaganda. Distinctions, therefore, can and ought to be made. We can best do this once we recognize that many of the decisions that all of us make are political and that no person or institution is objective or neutral. Then we can go about the business of judging whether decisions are wise, or humane, or effective, or intellectually defensible.

This brings me finally to professional associations. Historically, the professional associations have been perhaps the most cloistered of our institutions. Most have limited resources, own no property, and make few decisions that significantly affect the lives of others. For most of us, our affiliation with a professional association, unlike our affiliation with the place we work and unlike our own scholarship, is a decidedly minor factor in our lives. Hence the associations have been able to remain relatively pure, existing primarily as clearing-houses for scholarly and professional activities. Yet, the journals published by the associations have continually reflected changing political and social values. And that perennial question of where to hold the convention has never been free of political overtones. For two generations, most professional and scholarly associations in this country met regularly in cities that were racially segregated and in hotels that would not accommodate black people. They did so even when it meant that some of their own members could not participate in the convention. It was not until the 1940s that the associations gradually came to recognize that by acquiescing in a system of racial segregation they were casting their lot in support of that system. Thus, professional associations have never been able to totally avoid political decision making.

The question, then, for professional associations is not whether to be political, but when and how. There are some political decisions that nearly everyone supports. I expect that no one today would oppose a decision by the Society of American Archivists to refuse to meet at a hotel that discriminated on the basis of race even if that
were legal. On the other hand, there is also broad agreement that professional organizations should avoid some political issues. No one seriously argues that professional organizations should endorse political candidates or take a stand on every controversial issue to come before Congress or state legislatures. But many cases fall between these extremes.

Where, then, should the line be drawn? Each case that falls within the grey area must be considered on its own merits. But we can at least establish some guidelines. Let me suggest a few.

1. Is the issue relevant to our professional concerns? To many people this should be the only criterion. Associations of historians and archivists, for example, regularly pass resolutions urging government bodies to preserve and provide access to historical records. The Society of American Archivists, at its 1979 business meeting, passed a resolution recommending the continuation of the West Virginia State Archives, which had been scheduled for termination under a state sunset law. In such cases, the issues are clearly relevant to professional concerns. This criterion is so important to many professionals that resolutions have at times been shaped in curious ways to make them seem relevant to a particular profession. When the Society of American Archivists, at its 1982 business meeting, passed an anti-nuclear resolution, it justified it, in part, on the grounds that nuclear war would destroy historical records. In my judgment, no organization needs an excuse to pass an anti-nuclear resolution. But certainly relevance should be an important criterion, although not the only one, for organizations to consider in deciding why and how to act. Professionals should speak out on issues about which they are knowledgeable. We needed to hear what associations of Asian scholars thought about the Vietnam War or what nuclear physicists think about weapons testing. Others ought not to be precluded from speaking out, but those with expertise have a special obligation to do so.

2. How effective would a resolution or an action by a professional association be? None of us like to spin wheels or to spend time on projects that are utterly and totally futile. On the other hand, we ought not be so self-important as to suppose that a resolution by our professional association will suddenly cause the world to sit up and take notice. Actions within our own area of expertise are most likely to be effective. But organizations, like ours, which enjoy the respect of the community, can, particularly when joined by other professional associations, affect the policies and actions of elected representatives. Politicians pay close attention to what their constituents think, and a resolution by a professional association is one way to let them know. On the other
hand, a resolution addressed to a foreign government, particularly to a government that is generally insensitive to public opinion, is not likely to have much effect. I have always been bothered by the argument that political activists are spending too much time criticizing the United States government while remaining silent about the Soviet Union. Most of us dislike a great deal of what the Soviets do. But we are Americans, not Russians. We have some chance, and a real responsibility, to affect the actions of our own government. We can do little to influence the Soviets.

3. How appropriate is the particular action that is being considered? Even on issues about which there is agreement, some means are inappropriate. We might want the association to pass a resolution in support of a cause without committing ourselves to participate in a particular action designed to advance that cause. It is here that the ERA boycott became a difficult issue. I see no reason why a professional association committed to equal opportunity for all people, particularly an organization with a high percentage of professional women, should hesitate to take a position in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment. But the tactic of boycotting states that had not ratified the ERA raised other questions. Should cities be punished for the sins of their state legislatures? I know from my own experience that urban legislators lose many legislative battles to their rural colleagues. Should Chicago, New Orleans, or Kansas City have suffered from a boycott even if most of its legislative representatives had voted for the ERA? Moreover, should we have risked the jobs of hotel and restaurant employees in these cities, many of whom are women and members of minority groups? I supported the boycott in the organizations to which I belonged, but it was a difficult decision to make.7

4. How important is the issue? Professional associations have other things to do. They are not primarily political organizations. They must be highly selective about the issues they consider. Unless the issue is of special concern to the particular profession, it ought to be an issue of overwhelming importance to our society, one about which we cannot in good conscience remain silent. There will be disagreements, of course, over what these issues are. I would suggest, however, that the issue of racial segregation in the 1950s, the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and nuclear weaponry today would fall into this category.

5. Does the issue center on a set of values held by a broad consensus of the association? To be sure, every professional association includes people with widely varying political views. But there is a humanist tradition that most of us in the learned professions
identify with. Issues concerning nuclear war, racism, sexism, and intellectual freedom fall within that tradition. On the other hand, I would think it unwise for a professional organization to tear itself apart over an issue on which there is deep disagreement among people arguing from equally sincere humanistic values. A resolution passed without consensus will probably have little effect and might seriously damage the health of the association.

In the end, there is no simple solution. As sentient, conscious, presumably responsible people, we cannot avoid making political decisions. The concepts of neutrality and objectivity are impossible to achieve and, more often than not, smoke screens to hide what are really political decisions in support of the status quo. Inaction can have political consequences as far reaching as action. Whatever we do, or do not do, is political. We should, therefore, try to understand that and then attempt to determine, in as humane and responsible a way as we can, when and how we should act on the great issues of our time.

FOOTNOTES

1. My account of this incident is based on my memory—and that of several colleagues. No verbatim records of department meetings are kept and the minutes customarily omit the details of potentially embarrassing internal conflicts.
2. See, for example, Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), especially chapters 1 and 6.
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