Diplomatic Historian to Lead “Global Institutions” Project for American Assembly

Francis J. Gavin, assistant professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, and a diplomatic historian by training, has been appointed as the director of the Next Generation Project Creating Better Global Institutions for America. The project is a new initiative sponsored by the American Assembly, a national public affairs forum founded by Dwight D. Eisenhower in affiliation with Columbia University.

The Next Generation Project is designed to stimulate new thinking about the international institutional framework that has served the United States for more than 50 years but may need to change to adapt to the new century’s challenges. It will engage the next generation of emerging U.S. political, academic, professional and civic leaders with senior experts who have played a role in shaping American international policy. The project will include a series of national assemblies preceded by regional assemblies across the country, cosponsored by several of the nation’s leading public policy institutions and universities.

“I am very honored to be working on such an exciting project with the American Assembly, one of the most distinguished public policy forums in the world,” Gavin said. “Calling together the nation’s best talent to study how best to improve both our national and global institutions is of vital importance to our future prosperity and security.” For more information on Gavin and the project, go to www.utexas.edu/lbj/news/jul05x/gavin.htm.

Hollywood and High Fashion at Columbia!

Once upon a time, it was a case of ‘never the twain shall meet’ between an Ivy League university like Columbia and the world of high fashion and Hollywood glamour. Nowadays, however, the two worlds are being bridged with more and more celebrities taking part in CU Life and Columbians venturing into the celebrity world.

Female celebrities in particular seem to be drawn to Columbia Fashion editor Anna Wintour was here recently for a reception with journalism students—an experience she recounted in her letter in the September Vogue issue about the students who hadn’t excited at her job after so many years (answer: the change to work with the best writers and photographers in the business).

Columbia is now a preferred destination for the growing numbers of young stage and screen actresses seeking degrees from top universities. A recent New York Times article cited several prominent examples: Julia Stiles, Amanda Peet and Maggie Gyllenhaal. (Christina Ricci and Katie Holmes were admitted to Columbia but did not attend.)

A Philosophical Exhibition on the Art of 9/11

Arthur C. Danto, Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, is the curator for a new exhibition on “The Art of 9/11,” featuring works that show how art embodies grief and how artists dealt with the attack. The exhibition is being held at Apexart, 291 Church St., and will run through Oct. 15.

In his accompanying essay, Danto wrote that one of the truths he discovered in the early aftermath of the 9/11 attacks was that ‘even the most ordinary people respond to tragedy with art.’ He recalled that among the many unforgettable experiences of that time was the sudden unexpected appearance of little shrines in front of doors, on windowsills and in public spaces everywhere.

Gradually, he came to realize that many of his artist friends had created works in a similar ‘spirit of piety’—an idea he explored in his writings for The Nation, where he’s been an arts columnist since 1984. (Reprints of his Nation articles on 9/11 and art appear in his book book, Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap between Art and Life.)

Danto says he thought the topic would make an “interesting philosophical exhibition” and approached Apexart, an arts organization in lower Manhattan, with the idea of staging the exhibition on the fourth anniversary of 9/11.

Among the works on display are Barbara Westman’s haunting photo of blue lights commemorating the Twin Towers; Leslie King-Hammond’s tribute to the “warrior spirits” of 9/11; Mountaik Yarmy’s “wreath” for Ground Zero; and Jeffrey Lohn’s exploration of the photos of missing persons that went up all over the city, showing their disfigurement from rain and dirt.

The show also includes works that don’t immediately appear to relate to the 9/11 tragedy, such as Danto’s new Commission on the Future of Higher Education to address the skills needed for the 21st century. Members include American Council on Education President David Ward, former MIT President Charles Vest and former University of Michigan President James Duderstadt.

Danto’s essay for the exhibition: “9/11 Art as a Gloss on Wittgenstein”

Legislative Report

Most scientific and educational funding has not yet been finalized for the fiscal year 2006 (10/01/05–9/30/06). Congress has thus been working on a string continuing resolution to ensure that agencies can continue to function at least through early November.

Budget hawks have proposed a number of cutbacks in anticipation of having to cut relief for Katrina victims and Gulf reconstruction costs, currently off-budget. All of the proposed cuts will face stringent opposition; nevertheless, we expect to see reductions in many programs of interest to the higher educational community.

Both House and Senate committees have passed a three-month extension of the Higher Education Act. The Senate also marked up a multi-year bill setting the ‘blueprint’ for annual funding. The Senate Pell grant increases, additional loan borrowing caps, higher student work-study caps and further reporting provisions for colleges and universities related to safety, costs of higher education and international education.

In other news: Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has approved a new Commission on the Future of Higher Education to address the skills needed for the 21st century. Members include American Council on Education President David Ward, former MIT President Charles Vest and former University of Michigan President James Duderstadt.

ON THE WEB | www.apexart.org/exhibitions/danto.htm

Right here in the Plasma Physics Laboratory is a machine committed to developing a commercially viable way to use nuclear fusion for energy.

The machine, known as the stellarator, continues electrons for an extended time, allowing scientists to conduct carefully controlled experiments. Thomas Sunn Pedersen, in the department of applied physics, designed and oversaw its construction in 2004. Although the sun and stars are fusion reactors, the production of useful controlled fusion on earth has not yet been achieved, despite decades of effort. One of the hurdles is in confining the plasma long enough for appreciable fusion to occur.

Pedersen says recent results show that more than 100 billion electrons can be confined in the Columbia Non-Neutral Torus experiment under way using the stellarator. Ordinarily, such a cloud of electrons suspended in a vacuum would fly apart in a fraction of a microsecond.

Pedersen says this is only the beginning. “As we get to understand plasma behavior, we expect relatively small changes in the confinement time,” he says.

Pedersen received the National Science Foundation’s most prestigious award to the early career-development activities of teacher-scholars who most effectively integrate research and education with the mission of their organization. The $800,000 award will be allocated over five years and can begin as soon as this month.

For more information on the stellarator, go to www.up.columbia.edu/CNT/