

# The New Criterion

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## Some clarity about the Alexander Hamilton Center

by Roger Kimball

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### Some clarity about the Alexander Hamilton Center

[Posted 1:54 PM by *Roger Kimball*]

Readers of *The New Criterion* and *Armavirumque* know that we have commented several times on the fate of the proposed Alexander Hamilton Center at Hamilton College (see [here](#), for example, and [here](#).)

The four faculty founders of the ill-fated center have now released a detailed response to misinformation about the Center that has been circulated by the Hamilton College administration. Since it is likely that the tactics of intimidation employed by the left-wing faculty at Hamilton will be copied by faculties elsewhere in an effort to enforce intellectual and ideological conformity, the response will be of interest far beyond the Hamilton community. I am delighted to be able to share it with our readers:

**From:** Douglas Ambrose, Sidney  
Wertimer Associate Professor of  
History; James Bradfield, Elias W.  
Leavenworth Professor of Economics;  
and Robert Paquette, Publius Virgilius  
Rogers Professor of American History  
**To:** Friends and Members of the  
Hamilton Community

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4 April 2007

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Subject: Alexander Hamilton  
Center for the Study of Western  
Civilization

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We, the founders of the Alexander Hamilton Center for the Study of Western Civilization (AHC), have written this document because we disagree strongly with the recent statement issued by the College's Office of Communications and Development (C&D) regarding the demise of the AHC. Most troubling to us is the assertion by C&D that under either the original or the revised charter the AHC would, or could, have operated separate from the College in a manner inconsistent with the fiduciary responsibilities of the Board of Trustees. In this communication, dated 29 March, to alumni, parents, and other members of the broader Hamilton community, Dick Tantillo, Vice-President of Communications & Development, attempts to identify and explain "the circumstances surrounding the decision not to establish" the

AHC on campus.

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The founders of the AHC have read this document and regard it as a serious misrepresentation of the facts. It does, however, provide us with an opportunity not only to try to set the record straight, but to put the recent unpleasantness behind us. All of us have a full plate of scholarly endeavors to keep us busy. All of us have families. We have no desire to engage in an endless cycle of debate and recrimination or in a game of "gotcha" with the administration and Board of Trustees. They have far greater resources than we do; their bullhorn drowns out ours, and, we fear, the college will continue to suffer from the cacophony. It is time for us to move on. In short, we hope that this public statement on the collapse of the AHC will be our last.

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In the souring of any agreement, the principals will undoubtedly see things differently. Although each

party is entitled to its own opinion as to what went wrong, each party is not entitled to the possession of its own facts.

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On 24 August 2006, Douglas Ambrose, James Bradfield, and Robert Paquette met Dean Joseph Urgo and President Joan Stewart in the dean's office to toast the creation of the Alexander Hamilton Center. A few days before Dean Urgo had announced to the founders, "We have three major initiatives underway: the AHC, the Molecular Design Center (in Chemistry, under George Shields) and the Richard Couper Press, a library initiative headed by Randy Ericson. We're approving and backing all three (and I'll announce them at the first faculty meeting)." About two weeks later, on 6 September, the College issued a press release that described the AHC as "an exciting faculty initiative" that dovetailed with increasing popular interest in one of this country's most influential founding fathers. The three

founders of the AHC described their "lofty aspirations" for the center and their "ambitious agenda." "We fully intend," said Paquette, "to build an edifice that will stand the test of time and serve as a beacon light for scholarship and high standards among this country's elite liberal arts colleges." Simply put, we intended to broaden and deepen the conversation on campus.

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We presented to the full board of trustees on 14 October 2006 a sampling of what we had in mind for the first three years of the center's operation, annual thematic programming, for example, on antislavery, property rights, and the evolving relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Subsequent events, however, conspired to make a mockery of our aspirations. The original agreement unraveled within two months. As a result, an AHC will not be moving forward on the Hamilton College campus.

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1. Mr. Tantillo states: "A governing document for the center was drafted and announced in September, but funding had to be secured for the center's operation. The College helped the proposers [sic] make contact with prospective donors about supporting the new initiative and, as you are aware, the College received and announced a multimillion dollar pledge for the proposed center from a life trustee, as well as several smaller contributions."

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*The founders reply:*

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a) The charter of the Alexander Hamilton center went through multiple drafts before September. Dean Urgo and President Stewart reached an agreement with the founders on the charter in August.

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b) In the meetings that led up to that agreement, the founders had several meetings with Mr. Tantillo and representatives of C&D. Early on Mr. Tantillo proved most

enthusiastic about the endeavor and asked the founders what C&D could do to help. We answered at the end of the first meeting, "We don't think that we will need your help [in raising money]." We told the college from the beginning that the success of the AHC would rise and fall on the ability of the founders to raise fresh money. Unlike most faculty initiatives in Hamilton's history, we sought to establish the AHC without the college's largesse-asking for neither a dime nor a paper clip. As Ambrose told President Stewart on 5 November, "I have always believed that, from the College's standpoint, the AHC is a "win-win" proposition. We bring in fresh money, we reaffirm in the minds of countless alumni and friends of the College that one narrow political faction does not control intellectual life on the campus, and we provide our students with exposure to serious scholarship on topics of fundamental importance."

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c) We knew from preliminary conversations with philanthropists, philanthropic foundations, and alumni (including Carl Menges) that support would be forthcoming in unknown amounts. In short, the founders knew that substantial funding was on its way without the help of C&D. Mr. Tantillo clearly understood the potential of the center to heal wounds among the alumni in the aftermath of a number of divisive events. When he persisted in offering the support of his office, we gladly accepted. He would not have offended us by saying that C&D was preoccupied with other fundraising priorities. Robert George at Princeton raises money on his own to fund the James Madison Program. We intended to do the same and had been busily at work before our first meeting with Mr. Tantillo in sounding out potential benefactors. Unlike Professor George, whose program runs on annual gifts of operating capital, the founders of the AHC intended to help build



the College's endowment. We did indeed have several meetings with Mr. Tantillo and other representatives of C&D during which prospective donors were discussed. Before the collapse of the AHC, C&D and the founders were working together on a one million dollar grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities under the "We the People Initiative."

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d) Carl Menges announced his \$3.6 million commitment to the Alexander Hamilton Center in his Manhattan apartment on the morning of 27 September 2006. A representative of C&D, Paquette, and President Stewart attended his announcement. Mr. Menges made clear to those in attendance that his commitment derived from both his admiration for the charter and his faith in Paquette's ability to realize the charter's clearly stated scholarly goals. At the meeting, President Stewart expressed her opinion that the AHC might become "the greatest legacy" of her

presidency.

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e) Mr. Menges, "the trustee who had made a significant financial pledge to the center," as Mr. Tantillo's letter correctly states, eventually resigned from the board. He did so in frustration at the inability of the administration to explain effectively its changing position on the AHC.

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f) We do not know how much money C&D raised or could have raised for the AHC. The founders on their own initiative had secured tens of thousands of dollars with several foundations in support of future programming. We had secured commitments to support the AHC long before C&D ever got involved. Alumni had contacted each of us personally-not through C&D-to promise thousands of dollars of support. The Watson-Brown Foundation had promised Paquette financial support for the first year colloquium on slavery and antislavery. We obtained from and then had to return to the

Intercollegiate Studies Institute a \$10,000 grant that was to have supported a kick-off celebration of the center at the New-York Historical Society on 11 May.

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2. Mr. Tantillo states: "As the proposed charter for the center began to circulate, it generated concern in several quarters. . . . [T]he board of trustees, which has ultimate fiduciary responsibility for the College and its programs, conveyed a clear desire that Hamilton College should have more control than the charter allowed."

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*The founders reply:*

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a) We presented information to the full Board of Trustees on 14 October 2006. Before that date, five of the nine seats on the AHC's Board of Overseers had been filled with the explicit approval of Dean Urgo and President Stewart. Carl Menges, Elizabeth McCormack, and Henry Bedford, all trustees at the time, had consented to serve.

James Bradfield and a college president had agreed to serve on the Board of Overseers as well. President Stewart and the founders had discussed other possibilities, including faculty, trustees, and alumni. None of the remaining seats would have been filled without the approval of the dean and the president.

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b) When the founders presented information to the board on 14 October, the response by those in attendance clearly indicated that the overwhelming majority had not seen the charter beforehand and were therefore unprepared to discuss it on site in any depth or detail. Dean Uργο informed us subsequently that a few members of the board had driven the discussion about the need to rewrite the governance structures.

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c) Chairman of the Board Stuart Scott called Paquette back to Buttrick Hall to discuss the need to revise the governance structures of the charter. Mr. Scott expressed

open enthusiasm for the center, but insisted that the charter needed to recognize the authority and fiduciary responsibilities of the Board of Trustees. Indeed, the principal reason that the charter did not contain such an explicit statement was that a model donor agreement in the process of being worked out between Carl Menges and C&D would have, we believed, sufficed to address that concern. As Bradfield pointed out in a letter to President Stewart on 4 November 2006, "[T]he proposed gift agreements . . . gives specific, and powerful, authority to the Dean of the Faculty that is more than adequate to enable that dean to prevent misbehavior by the executive director of the Center or by its overseers." Dozens of Hamilton alumni had expressed their interest in donating. We had told them to await the construction of the Menges document, which would be the model for all other donations through the college to the center. A phone call to Paquette from another trustee soon

thereafter repeated the need for what was described as a minor insertion to recognize the authority and fiduciary responsibilities of the board. The founders of the AHC had no problem with such an insertion. We did, however, draw the line in having the protective insulation built into the charter stripped away, leaving the center vulnerable to takeover by politicized elements of the faculty.

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d) On 14 October, Dean Uργο informed the founders that a lawyer on the board had a copy of the charter and would be rewriting it. We did not receive a copy of the first round of proposed revisions from the administration until the afternoon of 3 November 2006, twenty days after the board meeting. At no time from 14 October to 3 November did this legal representative of the board make any effort to contact the founders of the AHC to find out why they had constructed the particulars of the governance structures the way they did.

Indeed, through Dean Uργο, we were apprised that this trustee was unaware until some days after 14 October of such prior developments as the choices to fill five of the nine seats on the Board of Overseers. In retrospect, given the concerns of the board, the creation of a subcommittee of the board to meet and converse directly and intensively with the founders about the specifics of the charter might well have proven to be a wiser course of action in attempting to reach a resolution of the differences.

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e) The founders met with President Stewart and Dean Uργο on two occasions (6 November and 22 November 2006) to discuss revisions to the charter. To call these conversations negotiations would be to grace the proceedings with a word they do not deserve. The more than dozen changes we proposed on 22 November were never discussed. The administration made it clear, especially at that meeting, that the

AHC would not move forward even though we had directly and substantively addressed the concerns of the trustees. The administration pulled the plug on the AHC AFTER we had made changes to a document that the Dean and President had signed. We again urge those interested to consult the revised 22 November charter. Serious negotiations benefit from a full exposition, face to face, of each side's views. An imposition is not a negotiation.

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3. Mr. Tantillo states: "The overwhelming sentiment expressed by trustees was that any center that was housed at Hamilton, for Hamilton students and bearing Hamilton's name should be subject to Hamilton oversight. Similar concerns were reflected in a resolution approved at an earlier date by a majority of the faculty."

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*The founders reply:*



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a) At every meeting with representatives of the administration, including Mr. Tantillo, before the agreement of 24 August, the founders underscored the importance of the AHC's governance structures in preventing the center from being captured by politicized elements of the faculty or from being transformed by the arbitrariness of weak and politicized deans. Our concern in this regard is deeply rooted in Hamilton's recent history. We knew from our conversations with prospective donors that money would be forthcoming if they had reasonable assurances that the mission integrity of the center could be maintained. Given the discrete political history of Hamilton College-and the founders represent collectively more than seventy years of service to the college-we considered such precautions imperative. Specialists in center-building at other institutions had underscored to us the importance

of strong governance structures to protect the center's scholarly mission. One only has to look at the transformation of the Ford Foundation over the years to understand the founders' apprehensions. Furthermore, the center was constructed to be a programmatic initiative, not a curricular initiative, following procedures clearly laid out in the faculty handbook. A programmatic initiative does not require faculty approval and-by extension-faculty primacy. We did not seek to alter the curriculum of the college in any way, to create new courses arbitrarily or new faculty positions. We were designing educational extras-awards, internships, colloquia, conferences-that would benefit both students and faculty as well as elevate, we thought, the scholarly reputation of the college. We openly compared our initiative to that of a scientist in Hamilton's chemistry department who creates a new laboratory by securing outside money from a science foundation.

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b) The founders responded to what we thought were the chief concerns of the trustees by creating this insertion: "The Alexander Hamilton Center is entitled to the same academic freedom as that of a college professor in teaching and research. The Board of Overseers of the AHC ensures that its policies and operation comply with the resolutions of the Trustees of Hamilton College and their fiduciary responsibilities. The founders of the AHC recognize that violation of those resolutions, disregard of those responsibilities, or deviation from the center's scholarly mission as clearly defined in the charter may result in the removal of the AHC's executive director from his office by the president of Hamilton College and the Board of Trustees or the discontinuance of the center's funding by the College or both. This provision of the charter is irrevocable." We challenge anyone on the inside or outside of this debate to find in the charter of

any institute or center on any college campus in the country a more explicit recognition of the trustees' oversight of a faculty programmatic initiative. Nor can this insertion be read to deny "presidential interventions." The insertion clearly permits them, and thus allows the president and trustees to wield more than "an extreme form of authority in time of crisis." Indeed, it makes the removal of the director, leaving the center in place, relatively easy. The idea that the founders did not want the AHC "subject to Hamilton oversight" or that our revised charter "left intact language asserting the center's independence from Hamilton College" is absurd. Any careful reading of the original charter or the revised charter repudiates such claims. "Insulation" means protection not "separateness."

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c) Please note: The founders of the AHC incorporated this four-sentence insertion along with more than a dozen other changes into a

revised charter dated 22 November 2006. It is not true therefore, as the trustees were told on 1 December, that the founders "proposed the insertion of a single two-sentence paragraph" into the original charter that "would suffice to address all governance issues."

May we repeat: The four-sentence insertion accompanied more than a dozen other changes to the revised charter of 22 November. We urge all interested parties to consult that document to see those changes for themselves.

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d) At a meeting of the faculty on 10 October 2006, the first since the college announced the AHC's creation, faculty members debated a resolution signed by two dozen of our colleagues, the majority of whom can be identified as leaders or supporters of the left-of-center Kirkland Project or its successor organization the Diversity and Social Justice Project. According to the faculty minutes, "Proponents of the resolution expressed concern that the AHC charter threatened

faculty autonomy, created a governance structure that did not guarantee appropriate institutional involvement and undermined the authority of the Dean of Faculty, established a Board of Overseers that could include Hamilton College Trustees, and instituted a governance structure unlike those of other Hamilton groups." Please note-and this is no minor point--that criticism of the AHC included faculty concern about the inclusion of trustees by the founders on the board of overseers of the AHC. The faculty resolution insisted that "representatives of the Hamilton College community have input into the operation and governance of the AHC." But who counts as members of the Hamilton community? Apparently not the trustees and alumni, if the signatories of the resolution had their way. By inference from the resolution, they have all suffered a kind of social death. From the beginning, the founders of AHC had a more inclusive definition of the Hamilton community and

actively recruited trustees and distinguished alumni to serve on the board of overseers. Similarly, Robert George at Princeton runs his Madison Program-hardly " a "conventional departmental center" as maintained by the administration--with the help of an Advisory Council that consists of more than twenty members, none of whom are members of the Princeton faculty.

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e) The signatories complained of the "unprecedented and unacceptable autonomy" of the AHC. They demanded that the charter be amended to ensure far greater faculty input and oversight. A "general rationale" for the resolution appeared above the names of the signatories. Contrary to the published assertions of some opponents of the AHC that the only objections concerned governing structure, the resolution clearly indicates faculty anxieties about the Center's "programming and research" and how both would "influence the reputation of

Hamilton College." As far as we can tell, this resolution stands as unprecedented in the history of Hamilton College in its attack on a programmatic initiative of the faculty.

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f) Although the faculty voted 77 to 17 for the resolution, the vote cannot be considered "a majority of the faculty" since the meeting had about 100 faculty no-shows. In responding to this vote, Dean Uργο initially stood tall: "The AHC charter does grant its overseers the right to transform itself. . . . If the AHC executive board appointed a director who was out of favor with the Dean, do we not know how the Dean may make things difficult? Of all the powers I have, the right to meddle is perhaps the most ominous. Limits to freedom are the results of abuse, and limits have grown like choke vines around our freedoms throughout the history of Hamilton College and Hamilton Nation. As Dean, I will accept limits to our freedom only under compulsion and not without



resistance; and when defeated, will continue my defense of our freedom's circumscribed survival. I feel I must resist, however, even when we vote 77-17 to curtail that freedom. I do so not to counter our own freedom at this moment, but to protect the freedom of the faculty who will follow us, in less heated times, in their own unhampered pursuit of knowledge." Yet, in a recent article in the Utica Observer-Dispatch, Dean Urgo now claims that the AHC was "destructive to the faculty community here-so destructive that we were willing to walk away from a major gift." When, we ask, did the AHC "abuse" its "freedom" since it never had a chance to exercise any? If the administration insists on publicly claiming that the AHC was "destructive to the faculty community here" we would urge it to specify how, precisely, the AHC exercised such destructive force. We invested considerable time and effort in planning programs; we assembled an Academic Advisory

Board that included some of the most distinguished scholars in the country; we constructed a charter that would ensure mission integrity; we significantly revised that charter to accommodate trustee concerns-and we did all of this with the hope that doing so would enhance the intellectual environment on campus and bring recognition and respect to Hamilton College. Now the administration labels our efforts "destructive to the faculty community." One may well wonder how such words--and the actions they represent--may affect "the freedom of the faculty who will follow us . . . in their own unhampered pursuit of knowledge."

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4. Mr. Tantillo states: "While the proposers [sic] later offered a counterproposal [the revised charter of 22 November 2006], it left intact language asserting the center's independence from Hamilton College."

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*The founders reply:*

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a) We can provide copies of the revised charter of 22 November 2006 on request. That document displays our revisions to the original document in boldface italics. The revised charter clearly refutes Mr. Tantillo's assertion. Furthermore, during a conference call of 6 November 2006 with President Stewart, Dean Urgo, and the founders of the AHC present, a lawyer on the board of trustees declared that our proposed insertion ("The Board of Overseers of the AHC ensures that its policies and operation comply with the resolutions of the Trustees of Hamilton College and their fiduciary responsibilities. The founders of the AHC recognize that violation of those resolutions, disregard of those responsibilities, or deviation from the center's scholarly mission as clearly defined in the charter may result in either the removal of the AHC's executive director from his office

by the President of Hamilton College and the Board of Trustees or the discontinuance of the center's funding by the College, or both. This provision of the charter is irrevocable.") "went a long way to satisfying the concerns of the board."

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5. Mr. Tantillo states: "It is important to understand that both the faculty and trustees expressed support for the programming that was to be part of the new initiative; the sticking point was the governance structure."

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*The founders reply:*

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a) We regard such a claim as, at best, naïve. As many of the critics of the AHC know full well, the key to the mission integrity of any enterprise lies in the control and quality of its governance structures. Did the principles of federalism and separation of powers in the Constitution, we would ask, have anything to do with the maintenance of a

democratic-republic? The Hoover Institution at Stanford stands as a shining example of a center that has maintained mission integrity precisely because it is insulated from Stanford's faculty. We might also point to the current, widely-publicized controversy surrounding the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy and International Affairs at Princeton University as one of many examples of the importance of government structures to mission integrity. Now it may be that the trustees see no danger to the AHC from political faction. If so, then they and the founders of the AHC have fundamentally irreconcilable views of the matter.

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b) On 5 September, according to the faculty minutes, Dean Urgo insisted "[I]t is not appropriate to draw a parallel to the Kirkland Project when it was in crisis. He does not believe we [the Hamilton community] should treat any new entity as another crisis waiting to happen; rather, his first instinct is

to trust the good will of the faculty involved." We heartily agree.

During our presentation to the full board on 14 October, we noted that we were nearing completion of the construction of our Academic Advisory Council, whose responsibility was to help the founders "chart an intellectual course consonant with its [the center's] mission." A "constellation of superstars," we told the board, had already consented to serve, more than fifteen scholars at the time with more on the way. They consisted of nationally and internationally renowned scholars from multiple fields whose politics spanned right to left: among them, Mary Ann Glendon, Learned Hand Professor of Law, Harvard University; Harvey Mansfield, William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Government, Harvard University; Robert George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, Princeton University; and John Stauffer, Professor of

English, American Literature, and Language, Harvard University. To us, the unraveling of the AHC looks like a colossal failure of discriminating judgment. If the powers that be cannot distinguish between the AHC and the Kirkland Project, between, say, Harvey Mansfield and Ward Churchill or between Mary Ann Glendon and Susan Rosenberg, then it is probably fortuitous that the AHC failed as a minority endeavor on this campus. Perhaps more to the point, Hamilton College squandered a chance to benefit from some of the great minds of the academy, from programming that would have brought serious scholars to the campus, from notoriety of the best kind-that a small liberal arts college was developing a center that was in the same league as those at Princeton, Brown, and the University of Texas at Austin. Hamilton College aborted an initiative that would have brought millions to the college from alumni, friends, and some of the

most prestigious grant-giving

organizations in the country. Let

us end the discussion then not with

anger, but melancholy, not with

acrimony, but regret. If the powers

that be cannot see the need for the

AHC to be insulated from the

threat of politicized factions of the

faculty, then it is wise that the

AHC did not get off the ground at

Hamilton College.

**Roger Kimball** is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).