

# zeitgeist

News, trends, history, and phenomena from the campus



## lectures

### **David Brooks**

*Bullish thoughts on America and a few surprises from the New York Times columnist*

David Brooks can name-drop with the best of 'em. George W. Bush? First-name basis. Presidential candidates? Knows them all. Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt? Consults with them regularly.

No, really. Brooks says he talks to dead people. These conversations keep him connected, he says, with a “hidden river of knowledge” that flows throughout history into our contemporary lives.

“All his life, Abraham Lincoln talked with the founders of this country. Theodore Roosevelt talked with the men and women who settled the West,” he explains. “Their priorities were hard work and social mobility. These are the political transitions I harken back to.”

Brooks, an internationally recognized journalist, was on campus September 10 as this fall’s Susan Resneck Pierce lecturer to present a talk he called “How Does Being American Shape Us,” and to spend time in class with students.

In his writing for the *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The New York Times*, where he has been an op-ed columnist since 2003, Brooks maintains a strong optimism about American culture. He believes we are continually being shaped by the fundamentals the early pioneers established. “Those founders saw in America’s lushness that God’s plan for humanity could be realized here,” he says.

Waiting a beat, he adds, smiling, “and that we could get rich while doing it.”

## In point of fact

David Brooks has been criticized for making assertions but not backing them up. “Brooks takes whatever opinions he happens to hold on a topic, and then—without citing a single piece of evidence—repeatedly asserts that ‘most Americans’ hold this view, and then bases his entire ‘argument’ on this premise,” wrote Glenn Greenwald, author of the bestseller *How Would a Patriot Act?*, on Salon.com recently. But Brooks’ talk on campus was filled with facts and figures. According to him:

### On optimism for America

- The younger generation in America is the most supervised in history. In the last 20 years the amount of time young people spend on their own or alone with peers has dropped 30 percent, while interaction in adult-structured activities has risen 30 percent.
- Since 1995 violent crime is down 70 percent; domestic violence down 50 percent; teen pregnancies down one-third.
- The economy is fundamentally strong: In 1970 the U.S. gross domestic product made up 30.4 percent of the world GDP. Despite surging Asian economies, that figure is slightly higher today.

### On our segmented society

- Well-off people are passing their advantages down to their children, creating a widening hereditary meritocracy. In families with an income of \$96,000 or more, the odds of children going to college are 1 in 2; incomes between \$50,000 and \$96,000, 1 in 10; less than \$50,000, 1 in 17.
- Political ideologies are segmented by vocation. People who are in business are 2-1 Republicans; accountants, 2-1 Republicans; academics, 11-1 Democrats; actors, 18-1 Democrats; journalists, 93-1 Democrats; librarians, 223-1 Democrats. “What happened to Laura Bush?” wondered Brooks.
- And the proliferation of specialty media allows people to confine their exposure to news and opinion outlets that reinforce their point of view.

That’s another surprise about Brooks: he can be funny. In his most public and unscripted arena, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS, he seems to leave his sense of humor in the green room. But laughter rang through Schneebeck Concert Hall as he talked about American quirks like kids today asking for a snack that would prevent colorectal cancer or the innate optimism of buying condoms in bulk at Costco. And the *Washington Post Book World* says his *Bobos in Paradise* and *On Paradise Drive* are “perceptive and amusing” and have a “bemused social taxonomy.”

### Looking both right and left

Brooks is at the top of his game now. Just as George Will became the “new” James Kilpatrick, David Brooks is the “new” George Will. (They even share a passion for the great American pastime.) But Brooks is no arch conservative. On campus, people left the lecture hall murmuring, “You’d never know he’s a Republican.” And that’s just what Brooks likes to hear, since he sees himself as a much-needed liaison between the two parties.

“Our political institutions don’t work as well [as they once did],” he says. “In the 1950s they could put aside their party differences and have conversations with one another. Today Republicans and Democrats don’t know anything about one another. I feel like an ambassador—I go and tell the other what they think. And they’re stunned. They had no idea what was going on with the other party.”

As a country, we’re stuck, Brooks says, because we don’t have a functioning process for conversation and decision, which results in indifference and inaction. “This [problem] transcends Iraq and Bush,” Brooks adds. “Getting this back is one of the subjects for the upcoming election.”

### Number One, not always a happy place

Brooks tells the story of attending a Baltimore Orioles’ game at Camden Yards and seeing a man kicking a Yankee’s cap that had fallen on the pavement. “They weren’t even playing the Yankees,” he recalls, “but first one man was kicking the hat, then another. Soon a mob was stomping on the cap. No one likes Number One.”

He extends this analogy to our place in the world, stating that even in the best of circumstances America will not always be the most popular country in the world. Not that we’ve helped matters recently with the Iraq War.

“In my view, we tried to spread Thomas Jefferson without spreading Benjamin Franklin,” he explains. “You need a civil society before a lot of other things. ... Iraq is a national humiliation, aside from everything else.”

### Fab fifties

For someone born in 1961, Brooks is fascinated with the 1950s. “I didn’t get to enjoy the 1950s, but I’m a great fan of them,” he says.

Now that’s a lament not often voiced, but he claims the ’50s were a period of middlebrow culture and civility. During that decade, *Lux Video Theatre* and other live theater programs presented plays by the likes of Clifford Odets, and Edward R. Murrow delivered the news—not entertainment clothed as news.

## Great profs

### Nancy Bristow: 2007 Washington State Professor of the Year

A thick packet of nomination papers submitted to support UPS history teacher Nancy Bristow's candidacy for Professor of the Year could be summarized in a word: Inspirational. Colleagues, administrators, and students all cited Bristow's dedication to students, enthusiasm for teaching and learning, timely and thoughtful communications, and first-rate scholarship.

"I was never afraid to ask questions, offer concerns, or take risks," said former student Heather Gergen '03. "My hand was always raised in Nancy's classes because of the supportive environment she created."



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Teaching, U.S. Professors of the Year is the only national program to recognize excellence in undergraduate teaching and mentoring. All undergraduate teachers in the United States, of any academic rank at any type of undergraduate institution, are eligible for the award. Entries are judged by top U.S. educators and other active participants in education.

The Professors of the Year were honored November 15 at a luncheon in Washington, D.C.

Bristow, who teaches 20th-century American history, has been on the Puget Sound faculty since 1990. "For students to engage successfully with the complicated and contested issues of the American past," she says, "they must become members of an intellectual community in my classroom, a community we build together."

She has received numerous teaching awards, including the UPS President's Teaching Award (1999), Associated Students of University of Puget Sound Outstanding Faculty Award (2001–02), Student Athlete Advisory Council Award for Outstanding Support and Commitment to Women's Athletics (2003), and the Alpha Kappa Psi Teacher of the Year Award (2003).

Bristow is the fourth Puget Sound professor to be named Washington Professor of the Year. Suzanne Wilson Barnett, professor emerita of history, received the award in 2002. Mott Greene, John B. Magee Professor of Science and Values, was selected in 1996. The late Robert G. Albertson, professor emeritus of religion, was the honoree in 1985, the first year of the awards. Puget Sound has had more Professor of the Year winners than any other independent college or university in Washington. — **Mary Boone**

"They had more coverage of opera, and people were expected to know about painters," Brooks says. "The novels and magazines were great. In 1956 *Time* had an eight-page spread on the Ash Can School of painting. Now the media caters to mass audiences. With 100 channels competing, Britney Spears will drive more [interest] than a piece on the secretary of the interior. This is a perverse effect of democratization."

Back then, politicians spoke with more intelligence, candor, and honesty. Today we've got President Bush's good-old-boy persona. "Bush sounds 20 [IQ] points more intelligent in private," Brooks says in a *New York Times* video. "I think that's because he spent his whole life as a rich Connecticut kid pretending to be a Texan ... He talks down ... to be regular, because he hated the people he grew up with."

While here at Puget Sound, he added: "All politicians now speak down to people. I watch the speech and then ride in the van with the politician, and it's like two different people. The speech is all bromides. Back in the van, we have a normal, intelligent conversation."

The chasm between the parties and the lack of dialogue is why, Brooks contends, "America is in such a bad mood." We don't seem to be able to solve our problems, in part, because they are vague and decentralized.

#### American ingenuity

Yet Brooks' optimism about America is unwavering. He notes that the gross domestic product is as strong as it was in the 1970s. He also sees as much innovation in business as ever before. "The number of patents has increased, bioengineering and neuroscience are strong. We're still really good at science and technical innovation," he says.

While living in Brussels as a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, Brooks shunned the laid-back, have-a-little-wine-with-your-two-hour-lunch style of life. "It really bugged me that in Northern Europe, where I lived, people would get a job at 25, and they'd know where they were going to sit in that office at age 65," he says. "They'd say, 'As long as I have a basic level of security, I'll sit around spending a lot of time at lunch in a bar drinking beer and eating mussels.' That passivity bothered me. They'd tell me I was crazy—just sit down and enjoy myself. But I wanted to get something done. Americans have this big ambition that sometimes gets us in trouble, but I like that energy."

Brooks is optimistic about the fundamentals of America, in part due to the younger generation. He likes the relative ease today between children and their parents. In China, Europe, and Japan, the average age hovers at 52. In America it's a young 38, which Brooks sees as leading to a vibrant culture.

But there's a caveat to his optimism: our fragmented, disconnected society. That's where being a student of history can help.

"The great people I've seen talking to the dead do so because they want to connect with the highest and most inspiring parts of the river [of knowledge]. ... They want to step outside their egotism and understand the river of events," Brooks says. "People who talk to the dead want to feel connection to this procession through the ages. They need to feel in their bones where they have come from, and what ultimately they will leave behind." — **Lynda McDaniel**