Thomas Jefferson is best known for the Declaration of Independence, in which he announced the separation of the 13 British colonies in North America—the right of Americans in these places to govern themselves. He should also be known for declaring another kind of independence: the sovereignty of the Americans living at any one time over their own affairs. In an earlier lecture, we have already heard Jefferson urge us to ‘consider each generation as a distinct nation, with a right, by the will of its majority, to bind themselves, but none to bind the succeeding generation, more than the inhabitants of another country’. ‘The dead have no right,’ he added. ‘They are nothing; and nothing cannot own something…This corporeal globe, and everything upon it, belongs to its present corporeal inhabitants, during their generation.’ This way of thinking gave Jefferson’s generation the courage to do the unprecedented—to found a new nation.

In our time, we have had revealed to us a new and wider meaning for Jefferson’s principle of the sovereignty of the present generation. The sovereign present has become the imperial present, dominating our knowledge and our concerns, reaching out with menacing power over vast areas of our Consciousness.

We have seen how aeronautics and electronics gave to spatial dimensions a disorienting new irrelevance. Americans, unsure whether what they viewed on television was actually happening in Chicago, in Los Angeles, in New York, or in a nearby studio, were newly uncertain about the where of events. They would be no less confused about the when. Candid photography, the hand-held motion picture camera, the novel powers of kinescoping and videotaping—all these would affect the viewer’s sense of time with a new ambiguity. Was what you watched actually happening while you watched? Had it been filmed an hour, a week or a year before, or was it a ‘rerun’ of something made last season? A new chronological fog enshrouded the television experience, which, of course, became an ever-increasing, ever more dominant proportion of everyone’s experience. By the mid-1970s, the best estimates suggested that an American, on the average, spent six hours a day at the television screen. The dimensions of this confusion were betrayed in a new meaning attached to ‘life’ itself, when Americans commonly asked themselves: ‘This thing that I’m watching—is it “live”?’

In the American vision of items extended through space, I have suggested that we Americans have developed a kind of farsightedness. In the language of the ophthalmologist, we suffer from hyperopia, a pathological condition in which vision is better for distant than for near objects. In our chronological vision, our sense of time, we Americans have come to suffer from an opposite disorder, a kind of near-sightedness. An ophthalmologist might call this myopia, a pathological condition in which the nearby is clear, but the distant is blurred and hard to discern.
In other words, we have enlarged our sense of the contemporary. We are overwhelmed by our sense of where we, and our contemporaries all over the world, are at this moment. Improved communications are obviously the most potent of the forces that overwhelm us with impressions of the now. And there are many others.

For two centuries, American mobility has required a willingness—sometimes it has been an eagerness—to leave things behind. Moving westward, across the Atlantic or across the continent, meant learning to travel light. And that meant separating yourself from the treasures, as well as the land, of your ancestors. In the diaries of the early 19th-century wagon trains, we hear a common refrain—the housewife’s lament at what could not be brought along.

Our technology, oddly enough, has made it more difficult than ever to transport objects through the expanses of time. The contagion of the annual model infects almost everything we wear or use. I happen to possess a gold pocket-watch which was given to my father when he became worshipful master of his masonic lodge in 1913. It was intended to become an heirloom, like the proverbial gold watch award for the man who has given 50 years of service to his firm. But the awarding of such watches has become increasingly rare—and not only because fewer people nowadays spend 50 years with the same company.

In the United States, our watches, like everything else, express an annual-model technology. The gold case of my father’s watch must be opened to set the hands, and must actually be wound. I am no connoisseur of time-pieces, and yet, in recent years, I have moved up from an old-fashioned self-winder to an electronic Accutron, and finally to a digital Quartzomatic.

The corruption of obsolescence has actually given novel appeal to works of art as items of investment. An item bought as a cold-blooded investment is not apt to be kept as an heirloom.

The high cost of labour and the constant development of new plastics has led to the ‘disposable’ everything. Each time we throw away a paper napkin or a plastic coffee cup, we discard another tiny link from today to yesterday.

The new perfections of communication which have climaxed in 20th-century America do not succeed in conquering time, however successful they have been in conquering space. The telegraph, the telephone, radio and television take messages and images across the continent, but they cannot cross the centuries. This simple, obvious fact, momentous for our American sense of time, helps account for our sense of the enlarged contemporary.

Even before our day of electronic communication, the improved American technology of communication had shown the same tendency, and the same limitations. The mass-circulating newspaper—facilitated by the telegraph and the telephone—after the middle of the 19th century, was to become the overwhelming new force in the American public consciousness. Now Chicagoans at their breakfast tables could be informed of events of the last few hours, whether these had occurred in Washington or New York, in Los Angeles or San Francisco, in London, Tokyo or New Delhi.
The multiplying daily papers were intended to be a report and not a record. Today’s newspapers had to become obsolete to clear the market for tomorrow’s. All over the world, newspapers multiplied. In Britain, for example, after the newspaper tax was repealed in 1855, the number of newspapers trebled in 40 years. In the United States, this increase was astronomical, expanding from a daily circulation of about 750,000 in 1850 to over 15 million in 1900. The increased demand for paper could no longer be satisfied by linen and cotton rags and straw, the main raw materials until then in use. This demand was met by new techniques for making paper, by boiling wood chips with soda or sulphite solutions. By 1890, most of the world’s paper was being made in this way. Wood pulp provided the endless quantities of paper in rolls two miles long to feed the speed presses which brought today’s news from everywhere to everybody.

By a malign providence, this very technology which succeeded in keeping the avenues of communication open through space, has actually clogged the highways of time. Within a few decades, it was discovered that the abundant new wood-pulp paper would not survive the passage of years. By the mid-20th century, the billions of wood-pulp pages were turning brown and brittle. The books of the modern world were falling apart. To be preserved for posterity, they would have to be put in some other form. The paper-making technology which had been improved to inform a literate democracy became a menace. Unless librarians and publishers acted promptly, the literary culture of modern times, along with the spoken words of earlier generations, would be gone-with-the-wind. In a single recent year—1970—the Library of Congress microfilmed some 2,200,658 disintegrating pages of modern books. Yet this was less than one quarter of one per cent of the volumes in its collections which were known to be turning to dust. In addition to the cost, there was the troublesome necessity for librarians to play God. They had to decide which of the past century’s books ought to command the attention of the future.

A similar malign providence seemed to preside over the birth of motion pictures. The nitrate film on which early American motion pictures were recorded was not only inflammable but explosive. This required another costly and complicated effort—again at the Library of Congress, and under the auspices of the American Film Institute—to transfer the works of Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and countless others from the dangerous early nitrate film to safety film. Otherwise, many of the early classics of our great democratic art would be lost to the next generation.

In our age, then, communication seldom means the transmission of messages from one time to another. Although there has never before been a generation that sent so many messages to itself, we are tragically inept at receiving messages from our ancestors or sending messages to our posterity. Much of what passes for ‘communication’ has become simply another way of reminding us of the here-and-now. Every day, we are flooded with disposable memoranda from us to ourselves.

When the only vehicle for diffusing news was the printed page, there was always a gap of at least several hours between when something happened and when people far from the scene got the word. It took time to prepare a report and get it from the site of the event to the waiting citizens. In the countryside or off the beaten track, they might
have to wait days or weeks, depending on the state of the roads and the efficiency of
delivery.

American history is full of examples of how the considerable time required to
transmit a message from one place to another actually shaped the course of events.
The nation itself was vast, and an ocean separated it from the capitals of Europe,
where crucial history-making decisions had to be made.

On 8 November 1861, a few months after the outbreak of the American Civil War
between the northern Union and the southern Confederacy, Captain Charles Wilkes of
the Union Navy ship San Jacinto, boarded and searched the British mail steamer
Trent, and took off the two Confederate agents who were then en route to Paris. In the
United States, the Secretary of the Navy congratulated Wilkes for his ‘great public
service’, and the House of Representatives even voted him a gold medal. The British
public, meanwhile, clamoured for war against the United States because of this
violation of British rights on the high seas.

Some time before this episode, the American Secretary of War, William H. Seward,
had expressed his quixotic hope for a war with some European power. Such an
outside threat, he argued, could not substantially damage the United States, and yet
would very likely solidify the nation, bring the errant southern states back into the
Union, and so end the Civil War. ‘If the Lord would only give the United States,’ he
prayed, ‘an excuse for a war with England, France, or Spain! The Trent affair looked
like Seward’s God- given opportunity. And if there had been a submarine cable across
the Atlantic during those early November days, the Trent affair easily could have
become the occasion for war between Great Britain and the United States.

Happily, there was time for the therapy of delay. On the American side, Seward,
counselling by the cautious President Lincoln, had time to reconsider, and in Britain,
too, there were weeks for passions to cool. The prudent Charles Francis Adams,
American minister in London, was given the opportunity to develop his personal
understanding with the British foreign minister, Lord Russell, and to palliate public
antipathies. The United States Government, finally convinced that Captain Wilkes had
violated the established practice of the seas, on 26 December ‘cheerfully liberated’ the
Confederate agents. But if Britain had joined the Confederacy’s war against the
Union, the struggle surely would have been lengthened, and the outcome might have
been different. Geographic distance, which in those days meant remoteness, gave
American diplomats on the distant scene the opportunity for reflection. An
ambassador was more likely to be an active agent of decision. The public, too, was
less tempted to act precipitately.

The rise of instantaneous communication, the ubiquity of radio and television, and the
intrusion of media into private and public vehicles, into public places, bars, airports,
and living-rooms today, reduces whatever chance there once might have been for the
therapy of delay. The high cost of publishing or broadcasting increases pressure to get
something into print or on the air—and speedily. If necessary, even before the
reporter can discover what it was, and surely before he has had an opportunity to
reflect, or to examine the event’s context and/or its significance.
The printed page required some person to translate the event into words. What
reached the reader was not the event itself, but the reporter’s account. Photography
changed this to a degree, but so long as the photographer was limited to a single shot of an event or to a few newspaper columns, he, too, was essentially an interpreter.

In our electronic age, the pressures and the trend are all in the other direction. The special virtues of the new media are speed, immediacy and vividness. More and more ‘reports’ of news are actual views of the events and the actors. The ‘documentary’ news ‘reporter’ no longer needs to translate the event into words, or to translate somebody else’s colloquial expressions into journalese. Much of the ‘reporter’s’ effort goes to manipulate the machinery—sometimes the actors themselves—to ensure proper lighting, to see that there are enough different cameras set at the proper angles—so that we can see the unmediated event. We see the actor in the event at the very scene of action. He has just had a microphone thrust in his face, and he tells us how it seems to him. ‘Eyewitness News!’ ‘You are there!’

American journalism had unwittingly provided every American with what Pliny called ‘proof of opulence, and . . . quite the glory of luxury, to possess that which may be irremediably destroyed in an instant.’ Every day—every few hours—television viewers were offered a costly news-product which might become worthless in a few hours, and was almost certain to lose its interest in a few days. Only by making today’s product obsolete would tomorrow’s product seem necessary. The news appeared in new models hourly. A well-informed citizen was expected to discard the seven o’clock model for that which appeared only three hours later.

This brought a newly urgent need—the need for erasure. An ever-larger proportion of the older model of news had to be erased to make way for the up-to-the-minute. Unmediated accounts were sent out before the ‘reporter’ had an opportunity to educate himself on the subject. Was ‘Diego Garcia’ a man, a country, a political party—or perhaps a cigar? Inevitably, every account required correction, addition, subtraction, revision. The more instantaneous the communication, the wider the diffusion of news, the greater the need for erasure. Every act of erasure was, of course, costly, and required as much technology as the original broadcast. The erasure itself became a way of reinforcing the recent.

Radio and television broadcasting measured messages by the minute and the hour. The repetitious pattern of advertising ‘news’ somehow froze a pattern for all other kinds. News reporting on the hour or the half-hour—when only part of the earlier news had been obsoleted—meant a great deal of repetition. I cannot recall any significant news event that I ever heard broadcast only once. The 11 o’clock news repeats the main items—sometimes the whole programme—of the ten o’clock news, the ten o’clock news repeats items from the seven o’clock news, and so on.

When the news came packaged in newspapers, you were free to decide when or whether you would open the package, and you could refuse to read the item again: But television is another story. You can’t scan the item before you read it. You can’t know what new calamity you might be missing, or what the breathless reporter might be about to describe. You become a victim of repetition even as you try to focus your TV vision on something really new. Such repetition, reinforcing the recent, becomes another device for enlarging the contemporary.
No wonder, then, that we have a new set of high priests. We need them not only to tell us what must be erased from yesterday’s news, but also to guide us through the fast-growing thicket of today. Back in the archaic age, the Age of Again-and-Again, when the principal human concern was for the return of the familiar, for ensuring the cycle of the seasons, the high priests were the masters of magic and religion, the priest-kings and the king-priests. They had the power to ensure the regularity of events. In the next age, the Age of History, the heroes were statesmen and men of science, innovators in thought and institutions, discoverers and inventors, or even historians—those who made the authentically new, or who recorded it.

In our age—an Age of the Enlarged Contemporary—those to whom we turn for meaning are the newsmen. They tell us what to make of the current flood of information and sensations. The increase of unmediated reports increases our need for interpretation—if not at the very moment when we first get the report, as soon thereafter as possible. In America, we have our parish priests—the local television news reporters—our bishops, and even our cardinals, the network ‘anchormen’. Our elaborate audio-visual aids themselves confine us within the peculiar concerns of our own age. We all become more and more like the old lady in Boston, Massachusetts, who was asked whether she travelled much. ‘No,’ she answered, ‘Why should I? I’m already there.’ Just as we prefer to stay home and see it on television, so we find it more comfortable to sit in our own century and be reminded of ourselves.

The paper record of the recent and the current becomes an overwhelming flood. It is estimated that the number of pieces of paper preserved for the administrations of President Lyndon Johnson—about 31 million pages—actually exceeds that of the manuscript collection of the Library of Congress on all earlier presidents before the 20th century. The gargantuan archives of the recent become a barrier between us and the more remote past. Our anxious efforts to enlarge the contemporary create a penumbra which is not quite the present, but not yet discarded to history.

The ‘generation gap’, once taken for granted, was a gulf across which the older generation passed its knowledge. Education was once equated with society’s ways of inducting the young into the accumulated wisdom. But as more and more of our valued knowledge is of a scientific or socially contemporary character, knowledge is confused with information, and it, too, becomes quickly obsolete. Not so long ago, we American parents were teaching our children the multiplication table, but nowadays we turn to our children to learn of the New Maths, the New Physics, and the language of computers.

The accelerating pace of scientific progress is another name for the quick obsolescence of knowledge. Books and articles with the power to make their predecessors obsolete tumble in on us every day. Scientists no longer dare await the printed word to learn of the progress in their field. They rely increasingly on the telephone, on Telex, and are airborne to frequent conferences drawing together their colleagues from great distances.

The great works of science inevitably bury their predecessors, and the best science fiction becomes obsolete by the fulfilment of its prophecies. But the great works of literature, of history, of philosophy and of speculation enrich and revive their
predecessors. As T. S. Eliot explained in his essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, every great writer has the magical power—if only we can see it—of deepening and broadening the meaning of all those who came before. But our age of the enlarged contemporary is tempted to assign the ‘irrelevant’ past to the junkheap of the obsolete. The din of the contemporary drowns out the quiet voice of the past.

Even as we in the United States progress in our efforts to enlarge our democracy, to give voice to those who have been denied, we have unwittingly disfranchised countless others. For, as G. K. Chesterton observed:

Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our father . . . the two ideas of democracy and tradition . . . are the same idea. We will have the dead at our councils. The ancient Greeks voted by stones; these shall vote by tombstones. It is all quite regular and official, for most tombstones, like most ballot papers, are marked with a cross.