The Flood of History

CONNECTION Interviews Historian Douglas Brinkley

Douglas Brinkley is an award-winning author and historian and director of Tulane University's Theodore Roosevelt Center for American Civilization. His wide-ranging portfolio includes books on John Kerry and the Vietnam War, Ronald Reagan and D-Day, Rosa Parks, Henry Ford, Dean Acheson and Jimmy Carter. He is also editing Jack Kerouac's diaries, Hunter S. Thompson's letters and Theodore Dreiser's travelogue.

Brinkley's latest book, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, is a narrative of the crisis before and after the monster storm, which he experienced firsthand.

Before joining Tulane, Brinkley was a professor at the University of New Orleans and at Hofstra University, where his American Odyssey course took students across the United States to visit historic sites and meet figures in politics and literature. His 1994 book, *The Majic Bus: An American Odyssey* chronicled his first experience teaching the on-the-road class which was the model for C-SPAN's School Bus.

Brinkley is a contributing editor for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* and *American Heritage* and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Brinkley was the keynote speaker at the New England Board of Higher Education's 2006 New England Higher Education Excellence Awards celebration held in February in Boston. NEBHE President Evan S. Dobelle and CONNECTION Executive Editor John O. Harney took the occasion to ask the historian about Katrina, history and higher education.

CONNECTION: You've written eloquently about Generation X. What do you make of the Katrina/Iraq War generation entering college right now?

Brinkley: I'm teaching three classes at Tulane and I'm amazed at how much curiosity students still have. These are the children of those counterculture parents who went on to the business world and they are now kind of rebelling. But instead of hitchhiking like Jack Kerouac did, these young people do things like "couch surfing" where they look on the Internet for free places to stay around the country. So if you're a college student living in Boston and you want to go to Santa Fe, you can get on the couch and can find someone on the Internet who's in college in Santa Fe and will let you stay there.

The difference between this generation in college now and Generation X is that technology has become such a huge part of their lives. Cell phones and the Internet are almost attached to them. That's the new way of meeting people whether it's to go to a picnic or a political rally or a sporting event. You used to see a lot more kids with books; now you see them wandering around with their laptops; they feel like they have books at their fingertips on their screens. And it's harder to get kids into libraries because they feel they have a library under their arm in their laptop.

CONNECTION: How does the new connectedness via the Internet color efforts like your "American Odyssey" course, in which you brought students physically to historic and literary sites across America?

Brinkley: I'm a real boot heel-on-the-ground person. I like to go to what I'm writing about. I'm writing about Hurricane Katrina right now so I go and look at the cracks in the 17th Street Canal in New Orleans. I go to see the barge that crashed into the Industrial Canal and take notes. Even if I'm writing about long-ago American history like Gettysburg, I go to the battlefield. When I was young, we used to take family vacations and I would love to visit historic sites. It's like the Walt Whitman poem, "When I heard the Learn'd Astronomer," where the student learns more by looking up at the stars in the mystical air than by listening to the learned astronomer's lecture and reading his diagrams. You can sit in a classroom and learn history, which is great, but you can also get out there and do and see things.

CONNECTION: Where did your "American Odyssey" bus trips stop in New England?

Brinkley: We'd go stay with Arthur Miller in Connecticut and students would read *Death of a Salesman.* Then we'd go down to Hartford to the Mark Twain House and the Harriet Beecher Stowe House. We'd go out to all the Revolutionary War sites. We'd read *Walden* at Walden Pond. We even went out to the Cape Cod National Seashore with the poet Lawrence Ferlenghetti. We'd go up to Lowell and do the Jack Kerouac walking tours and learn about 19th century industrialization.

CONNECTION: One way the post-Katrina generation of college students is going out and experiencing the world is through community service …

Brinkley: I don't think there is an epidemic of voluntarism sweeping over colleges though students may like to perceive it that way. Like adults, young people always find volunteering very exciting for the first week. But going down to the Gulf for a Habitat project for four days is one thing; volunteering for eight months is another. Everybody has a heart and when they see fellow Americans suffering, they want to do something. But they get fatigued or pulled away by money or family obligations or their love lives. So what was going to be six months helping after Katrina often turns out to be six days, which is fine because for six days, they did something.

CONNECTION: Are there new opportunities for higher education in the Gulf region and beyond as New Orleans rebuilds from Katrina?

Brinkley: Tulane wasn't hit that hard but her sister schools like Dillard and Xavier were just whacked off the grid. Their future is undetermined. There's still a sense of mourning going on in the Gulf Coast. Only if you're in the casino culture of the Mississippi Gulf Coast are you perceiving opportunities. It's really about downsizing—cutting funding, laying people off, having to consolidate programs.

CONNECTION: Is there a parallel between the everyday tragedy of lagging educational attainment and the tragedy revealed in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina?

Brinkley: We've de-prioritized education to the point where we have a real underclass struggling with rudimentary reading and arithmetic. The education crisis starts in kindergarten. We're not teaching literacy. We're not teaching history; people have no sense of their past. There's a concept that college is an honor or a perk—that you're lucky if you get that far.

CONNECTION: And for those who do get that far … how do you see the state of higher education today?

Brinkley: The universities are becoming too much like businesses, and faculty are being neutered. We need faculty who are in charge of the university, instead of trustees.

Everybody's worried about their specializations to the point where they're not communicating with people. History should be alive and flying in the street, not lying behind college walls because people are worried about interdepartmental squabbles and tenure. And university professors should be frontline people on the issues of our day. For New Orleans, to have a historian like John Barry talk about the Great Flood of 1927 was very important to understand Katrina. In the same way, to understand the AIDS epidemic, you can look at America's terrible flu epidemic. To look at the birth of hydrogen fuel cells for automobiles, you can look at Henry Ford's experiments with ethanol.

Just as we created housing projects that didn't work, we've created a bizarre system in our universities called tenure that works against great teachers if they happen not to be publishing anything. Why are you forced to write in an arcane journal article to show you know how to teach a 19-year-old about history? The best history professor I know at Tulane writes very little but he's very engaged with the students and the community. If there's going to be such a thing as tenure, people like him should be the gold standard. The proof of your legitimacy shouldn't be an article in some obscure journal out of Texas A&M or somewhere; it should be making your topic sing in class and getting students interested in books.

In fact, I find the best teachers today are people who come into the university and talk about real experiences. My students learn as much about music from a blues singer from New Orleans as they could from someone from Harvard with a Ph.D. in music. I'm not saying you can't learn from both but we seem to have gone very far into this esoteric elite, and it becomes clubbish and cloistered instead of out-front and open. We should be communicating with citizens, not hiding what we learn.

CONNECTION: Which leads to this term "popular historian" that's been used to describe you …

Brinkley: I'm not big on labels. Like Sartre said, I am not a waiter! I don't want to live my life being a "popular historian" or an "academic historian." It's more like what Elvis Presley said, "I just do what I feel like doing." I've loved history since I was a kid. I love traveling to historic sites. I like engaging in the big

issues of my time. I love teaching. I have a wonderful life because I get to write about things that interest me and I try to share that. I don't understand why if you were a great opera singer, you would want to share that with just three other opera singers instead of sharing it with the general public. To me that smacks of elitism, smugness and condescension and ultimately insecurity.

Instead of petty bickering over all these academic rules and regulations, we should be celebrating books. The most important thing you can do in a university, in humanities at least, is to get kids interested in books. Don't worry about what their reading, just get them addicted to books; let them realize reading is fun. Reading is also an important part of being a citizen. If they tend to like horror stories, let them read Stephen King. If they love history, let them read David McCullough, but get them hooked on reading a book from cover to cover. There are great lessons to be learned from dime novels to pop songs to heavyweight boxing bouts … you can take things from popular culture and upgrade them and take them seriously. Kurt Vonnegut learned how to write good fiction from reading bad fantasy.

CONNECTION: One of your books is on Henry Ford … how profound is his impact on educational aspirations today in terms of his bringing us the world of assembly lines and well-paying jobs for non-college graduates?

Brinkley: Henry Ford never believed in college. But today we've got a lot of opportunities with state universities and private colleges and, particularly in New England, the best graduate programs in the world. We should also keep an eye on people who are doing carpentry and sheet metal and electrical work. What we need in New Orleans right now is a battalion of people trained in the mechanical arts and from community colleges to come and rebuild. Unfortunately, we see these people looked down upon by people from Harvard and Yale and the like just because they don't develop their lives as intellectuals. But somebody who works hard and makes it through community college turns out many times to add a lot more to our nation's welfare than people who are professional critics.

At the same time, the concept of just throwing money at kids so they get an undergraduate education as a rite of passage has limitations. They don't always get that great an undergraduate education unless they're serious. They may slip by with Bs and come out with an English degree and have no idea what they're doing and no skills.

There also needs to be more connection between colleges with huge endowments and community colleges so they can work together. Just like Katrina reminded us how good the Coast Guard can be, you've got a lot of community colleges in New England but often people will roll their eyes when they come up. It would be great if a lot of the people who are giving money to universities, which are essentially corporations with access to billions of dollars, would start adopting a community college or two because that's where you're going to get the skill sets for jobs in the future, not out of university philosophy departments.

It's not OK anymore to be a super-rich Ivy League citadel when you've got squalor surrounding you. You're teaching your students a very bad lesson—that you are privileged and you can turn your back on the poor.

CONNECTION: Is there new room for that kind of collaboration as New Orleans rebuilds?

Brinkley: In the mind of the university, that becomes philanthropy … and they're the ones who are looking for the money now. But it's not OK anymore to be a super-rich Ivy League citadel when you've got squalor surrounding you. You're teaching your students a very bad lesson—that you are privileged and you can turn your back on the poor. That's what happened in New Orleans with Katrina: the haves were not taking care of the have-nots.

If you're Trinity College in Hartford or Boston University, look at where your school can start interacting with a community college and create programs together.

If there's a crisis in this country with senior citizens, why aren't colleges interacting with senior citizens' homes? Many elderly people who are lonely, living in nursing homes, could enjoy communicating on a laptop, and their teachers could be 20-year-olds. You have to get colleges to create programs to care about the senior home which may a block away from the gold-domed president's office. But you don't see that instinct. Most presidents have a more miserly idea that they'll be judged on how fat their coffers are, not the creativity of their interactions with the community in which their school is simply a business.

A lot of colleges wall themselves off from the community. They're protecting their resources and assets. The question is how can you make interacting with the community part of the college experience?