

Letter from the President...

Friends and Members of the ASA,

I am writing to update you on the status of the ASA's finances. Bruce Berman, Sandy Barnes, and I alerted you to the basic issue in the message from "the three presidents" that we sent in June: too few members and too intermittent membership among too many people.

The ASA's online system, inaugurated in 2004, has vastly improved our ability to maintain accurate and current information about membership, addresses, and payments. That ability, combined with the increasingly accurate financial reports that our new online system is generating, has revealed long-standing and structural shortfalls in our revenues; deficits have been building up for many years.

While previous Boards have attempted to address the issue by trimming expenses, initiating a membership drive, and launching a fundraising drive in 2004, the starkness of the new numbers, which the Board discussed during the 2005 Spring Board meeting, made it clear that more urgent action was necessary. We "three presidents" wrote in June, hoping that alerting everyone to the problem would prompt enough of you to bring your membership in the Association up to date (by paying dues), and that the situation would right itself out of all our obvious needs of, and sense of responsibility for, "our" ASA.

I am writing now to inform you of the measures that the Board took in Washington. Retiring Treasurer Sandy Barkan gave you the numbers for the ASA's current operating deficit during the Business Meeting. Those in attendance expressed clear alarm, which confirmed to the Board that a great many members - and doubtless also our friends - cared a great deal about their - our - Association. The rumors - vastly exaggerated - that then swept through the meeting assured the Board further of the deep pool of loyalty and professional responsibility among Africanists. We then convened a Town Meeting onsite to allow ASA members and friends the opportunity to hear accurate versions of the Association's finances and to consider steps to take to regain solvency. An impressive cohort of past presidents and former Members of the Board attended, again assuring us of the widespread commitment to the Association. Consensus emerged on the need to aggressively increase the ASA's revenue - through broader and more consistent membership.

Facts: As of early November, the Association was running \$85,000 behind its projected budget for 2005. For calendar year 2006, increases in real

ongoing costs combined with better estimating procedures indicate that the deficit may double that amount. These costs include paying down the Association's line of credit, which has been borrowed up to its limit. The savings available by trimming costs are insignificant in relation to the structural shortfall in revenue from dues. Dues and registration fees for the annual meetings have not been increased in recent years; the Board has increased both for 2006. But these, too, are minor in relation to the scale of the structural shortfall.

The only accessible solution lies in increasing our regular, dues-paying membership. Of the pool of Africanists who have paid dues at least once during the last six years, only about 25% were current as of April 2005. That surprisingly small figure rose to only 30% as the year continued toward the Annual Meeting. *These numbers are not enough.* The Association cannot serve our community's needs without the active participation of at least 45%-50% of you. The Board is entirely optimistic because we have the solution in our own hands: it is us. And so we appeal to all of you to renew now, or to restore former memberships, or to join for the first time - and to maintain your membership every year.

The Board has also taken further steps to manage responsibly the funds you contribute to the ASA, in the vitally important 50 Year Anniversaries Fundraising Campaign - which Ned Alpers takes every opportunity to encourage you to support with your donations - and otherwise. We have persuaded a top (*pro bono*) New York financial adviser to join the Board's new Investment Committee.

Beyond your professional commitments to the ASA and your personal loyalty to the friends whom you meet and greet at our Annual Meetings, we also appreciate that you expect tangible returns from your financial support. The Board - your elected representatives who make all Association policy - has greatly elaborated its committee structure. However, we acknowledge that the Board has not reported its own proceedings fully to the ASA membership, through timely minutes of its decisions and initiatives. I am therefore re-committing the Board to providing minutes that will be posted on the ASA website. Watch for notice of their availability and how to locate them. I encourage you to follow these reports closely and to contact your Board representatives with any questions that they might raise for you. The Board will identify general concerns, and I will take those up in a series of short messages to the membership throughout my year as your president.

We acknowledge that member services in the past have not always been as reliable as anyone would have preferred. The Association has weathered some difficult transitions at the Secretariat. But we now have the leadership of Dr. Carol Martin, who serves on the Board as the Association's Executive Director, and the dedication of the skilled professional staff that Carol has built. They, with our new digital capacities, can now implement the Association's policies much better than prior Secretariat staff was able to do. Before 2004, for example, an estimated one-third of Annual Meeting participants may not have paid registration fees; consider the costs to those of us who did. In 2005, the online system allowed only members who had paid registration fees to submit proposals. Unlike in previous years, the Secretariat enforced the March 15 deadline for submitting proposals for the Annual Meeting program; as a result, the Program Committee, chaired by Elisha Renne, was able to compose a fine and balanced set of panels and roundtables, and the Secretariat was able to post the preliminary version of the resulting program to the ASA website in July (rather than in September). The Secretariat thus used its new digital capabilities to enforce longstanding policies of the Association, and the Board is convinced that it has thus taken a major step toward fulfilling its fiduciary responsibilities to our membership.

You will also be able to vote online in the 2006 elections, and the Board is considering further web-based member services. These enhancements of member services will allow the Board to react constructively. Your money is being spent responsibly and productively.

The ASA is a membership organization. The Board and the Secretariat can function only through the efforts of the Association's members. The major gain of our new electronic capacity is to enable us all - members - to help ourselves.

What can you do to help now?

1. Pay your membership dues. Joining early brings you a full calendar year of membership publications and privileges. The Secretariat will no longer mail ASA publications to members not current after March 15 but will resume immediately upon renewal.
2. Most of all - encourage at least three other friends and colleagues to renew their memberships or to join. This is the overall ratio of current mem-

bers to non-current individuals in the ASA database. If at least one of these individuals responds, you will have helped the ASA to reach a membership rate of at least 50% of our community.

The bottom line thus remains the same as it was in June: we are as close to a solution as *your* telephone or the office next to *you*. Keep your membership current and bring your friends along for the stimulation and fun that we treasure in the Association. Together, we can make certain that the ASA will be there for us, and for Africa, in the future, when we will all need it even more than we do now.

What else can you do to help the Association to continue to rebuild?

1. Consult ASA ONLINE to determine your current membership status, to maintain the accuracy of your member record, or to confirm meeting program proposals or other current business you have with the Association. The database updates automatically. In keeping your records with us correct, you also assist the Association in developing new activities and in approaching potential sources of grants and other funding.

2. Check the ASA website (www.africanstudies.org) for information you seek and regular updates concerning ongoing ASA activities. Contact the Secretariat only if you do not find the information that you need.

3. Submit your proposal for the Annual Meeting well in advance of the deadline (March 15, every year). If you are based in Africa or plan to include Africa-based colleagues in your proposal, start early enough (now is not too soon) to anticipate difficulties in transferring funds to pre-register and to pay dues unavoidable in the post-9/11 environment.

Thanks, on behalf of the Board, to the many of you who have contributed to the successes of the year past. With your support and contributions, joined by the rest of us, I am firmly optimistic about the future of our Association. I look forward to working with you all as your president in the next months to lay a sound fiscal foundation for the two Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations planned for 2007 (New York) and 2008 (Chicago), and beyond. We will have plenty to celebrate.

Let's keep in touch.

Joe Miller