



INTRODUCTION

To the Members and Friends of the Oriental Institute

As this is written, the Israelis are encamped on the outskirts of Beirut and Iranian and Iraqi armies are reported to be locked in large-scale combat north of Basra. Of the countries in which the Oriental Institute's overseas fieldwork has traditionally been concentrated, only Egypt and Turkey do not presently have armed forces mobilized on a war footing. Although no less disquieting,

the deeper reality is less dominated by either state-sponsored or by terroristic violence than our media might suggest. The deadly rivalry of military build-ups, coupled with world-wide recession and continuing high rates of inflation and population growth, has brought a loss of economic buoyancy and looming problems of un- and under-employment in all but a few of the richest

OPEC member-states.

Ethnic, religious and social tensions also are increasing, more often deliberately fanned by the powers-that-be than dampened by anyone. In the wake of political turbulence, there has been a continuing hemorrhage of skills and talents, a diaspora of the trained engineers, physicians, administrators, entrepreneurs and intellectuals on whom a positive trajectory for the whole region desperately depends. To operate under these circumstances as the Oriental Institute does and must, as a center of humanistic research committed to the continuities of history and of an international dialogue among scholars of all creeds, is to share some small responsibility for an indefinitely prolonged, frequently dispiriting, and yet wholly worthwhile and necessary struggle.

Take just three of the activities reported on individually later in these pages. McGuire Gibson tells of the fifteenth campaign at Nippur in a series that began in the 1950s. The Assyrian Dictionary, now in the home-stretch with 15 volumes pub-

lished and 5 of the remaining 8 (plus 3 or more supplementary volumes) in various stages of preparation, was inaugurated in 1921 with the first volume published in 1956. The year's work in Luxor that Lanny Bell describes represented the fifty-eighth season of the Epigraphic Survey, a span interrupted only during World War II. By no means all of our projects require such extended time-horizons, but they are representative of a personal as well as institutional commitment to let the importance of the problem dictate the scope and duration of the work—a commitment that, along with much else, political uncertainties now place in jeopardy.

This says nothing of still more immediate sources of financial jeopardy, affecting the Oriental Institute and the University of Chicago just as they affect virtually every other civic activity and institution of higher learning. Curtailments in federal educational and research programs and in many forms of student support are indicators of the present state of an endlessly renewed de-

bate over our society's priorities. What place do we maintain for the cumulative growth of knowledge, especially reflexive knowledge of how the human condition came to be what it is? To ask what may be only a variant of the same question, what balance do we strike between meeting short-term material needs and preserving long-term aspirations of the spirit? Of course, in a pluralistic society like ours there need be no unitary answers to such questions. But as the balance tips toward a more circumscribed set of commitments at the national level, so our dependence necessarily becomes greater on the understanding and support of our Members and friends.

In stepping down from the Oriental Institute's directorship after nine arduous years, my predecessor John A. Brinkman opined in last year's Annual Report that we were entering "what promises to be a challenging and interesting period." I am reminded (now, not when I first read his words) of what the Chinese are said to have regarded as a curse and not a benediction: "May you live in interesting times!" A year later and perhaps a little wiser, I can only express our determination to meet the challenge of these interesting times with a strengthened sense of the importance of the dialogue that links the Oriental Institute to you and with you.

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