

This presentation has three goals: first, to introduce the Aspen Seminar, a long-running, high-profile implementation of the Great Books curriculum that professional classicists may nonetheless know little about; second, to raise key questions about the use of classical texts in ideologically motivated, goal-oriented settings; and third, to argue for the importance of fostering engagement with classical literature and ideas even, or perhaps especially, outside academia proper.

Chicago businessman Walter Paepcke founded the not-for-profit Aspen Institute in 1950. A year later, he enlisted the help of his friend Mortimer Adler in launching what would become one of the Institute's core programs, the Executive Seminar (today known simply as the Aspen Seminar). Paepcke had participated in Adler's Great Books seminar at the University of Chicago and had become convinced that America's top business leaders would benefit from a similar immersion in humanistic ideas and values. Paepcke and Adler addressed this need by designing what was essentially a Socratically moderated Great Books seminar in miniature. In the summer of 1951, the first group of executives gathered in Aspen, CO to read and discuss key texts in the history of Western thought. The original moderator was Adler himself.

The essential purpose of the Seminar, to “[challenge] leaders in every field to think more critically and deeply about the good society,” has remained constant since its inception (The Aspen Institute). The classical mainstays of the curriculum, too, have survived the test of time, as Plato and Aristotle continue to head the reading list and participants still conclude with small-group performances of Sophocles' *Antigone*. But in other ways, the Seminar has changed a great deal. It is now shorter, offered many times a year in several locations, and open to participants in various Institute leadership programs. The reading list has also changed with the times. And while the underlying ideology of the Seminar remains oriented toward democracy and capitalism, history has rendered obsolete one of the roles Paepcke originally intended for it—to serve as “an intellectual weapon in the Cold War” (Miller 58). In tracking these changes, this presentation aims to spark debate about the use of classical texts to further any aim, be it the spread of democracy, the development of leadership skills, or anything else.

Drawing on archival materials as well as interviews with past moderators and participants, the paper begins by introducing the history of the Seminar. It then proceeds to an analysis of the Seminar's development since its founding, leading up to a present in which the same classical texts are read, but by different people, in different places, and with different aims. It concludes with a call for professional classicists to be alert to extra-academic engagement with classical material whenever possible.