

Dean's Medalist explores connections between late-stage imperial decline and political apathy

By Julia Taylor, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Benjamin Ash has always been passionate about history, politics and activism, making it no surprise he chose to study how these intersect.

This spring, he will graduate with bachelor's degrees in both history from the [School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies](#) and political science from the [School of Politics and Global Sciences](#) at Arizona State University.

The Gilbert, Arizona, native — whose thesis for Barrett, The Honors College is titled “How to Cope in a Falling Empire: The Rationalization of Decline in National Identity” — began studying the topic after reading an article outlining the metrics of youth pessimism and apathy. This sparked his work on social cycle theory¹, declinist sentiment² and its impact on political consciousness.

Ash conducted research for his thesis through study abroad opportunities in Britain, France and the Netherlands, interviewing youth and investigating youth-led protests abroad. Having grown up and entered adulthood during such a heightened, polarizing time in politics, he said he began to identify with the very apathy he studied.

“I became determined to make sure that my work went beyond statistics and theories, beyond lectures and readings,” he said, “not just kept at a surgical, academic distance, but made real and intimate.”

Through his work, Ash received the Barrett Outstanding Graduate Award in Research and the University Outstanding Graduate Award in Humanities. He is also a [Barrett Global Explorers Grant Scholar](#), [New American University Scholar](#) (President's Award) and the Spring 2025 Dean's

Medalist for SHPRS.

Along with his own research, Ash has served in many roles at ASU, participating in two of SHPRS' [Undergraduate Research Experiences](#) with Associate Professor [Hannah Barker](#) and Associate Professor [Tobias Harper](#) and working as a teacher's assistant for The Human Event, a first-year Barrett seminar. This semester, he is also a research assistant to [Jeffrey Cohen](#), dean of humanities in [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#).

"I met Ben during his first year at ASU, when a Professor Will Hedberg referred him to me to speak about a project on monsters," Cohen said. "It has been a deep pleasure over the past four years witnessing Ben dive deeply into historical research, political theory and become fluent in French. Ben has been a constant reminder of how good our ASU students are. He has a capacious and curious mind — and a good heart!"

Ash is currently a finalist for the [James C. Gaither Junior Fellows program](#) at the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), where he would spend a year in Washington, D.C., working on European defense policy. If not, he will remain in Arizona, continuing his humanities research on campus and traveling as much as he can before returning to graduate school to study public policy and political economy.

We spoke with Ash to learn more about his time at ASU.

Note: responses have been edited for clarity/length

Question: Why did you choose ASU?

Answer: I had always dreamed of attending some bucolic liberal arts college, though that path was prohibited by cost. I was worried about being at such a large university, where it might have been difficult to be noticed. I am happy to say that I was very, very wrong. On the contrary, Arizona State has provided me with the resources and tools to excel.

With such a large, talented and diverse pool of educators and faculty, there is an endless supply of more to experience, more to learn, more to appreciate. Also, my parents are steadfast believers in the [charter](#). They have instilled in me the value of lifelong learning, something I absolutely credit with my success and choice to attend ASU.

Q: Which professor taught you one of the most important lessons you've learned at ASU? What was that lesson?

A: Though I have many cherished relationships with professors at ASU, I would say that Dean Jeffery Cohen has made the most impact on my college career. Researching under Dean Cohen has been an incredible capstone to my time at ASU. To me, he represents all the best this university has to offer — open-mindedness, compassion for students, integrity and a commitment to interdisciplinary work.

Among the many lessons he imparted on me, I would say the biggest one is the value of interdisciplinary work. True and lasting solutions require myriad, diverse perspectives. In that vein, humanities serve as connective tissue: the moral, imaginative and creative framework that bridges gaps between disciplines and imbues human elements to the forefront of innovation.

On that note, I will add a very salient piece of advice that Dean Cohen recently posted. Humanities students are best enabled to "make their own luck," with luck referring to "the serendipity that results from maximizing your future chances of connection and support via the cultivation of wide networks, broad skills and multiple roads for travel." I couldn't write a better encapsulation of my collegiate worldview.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to other students?

A: Use the enormous body of faculty, research, labs, resources and programs that ASU has to offer. I mean, truly use to their maximum extent. That, in my opinion, is the biggest strength of our university. Don't invent obstructions and barriers that don't exist when trying to reach out and connect. Be friendly, genuine, and eager to learn — those qualities shine through most.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: I have a special place in my heart for marine conservation. Ever since I was little, I have been obsessed with marine life (especially whales), and that interest brought me to La Paz, Baja California Sur, with a team of conservationists, where we focused on rural fishing sustainability and marine zoology solutions that bridged the gap between local communities and external scientists. I would use the money to continue that work — funding study in alternative fishing methods to reduce bycatch and equipping/educating rural, aquacultural communities with the tools and resources to improve their quality of life and the health of the oceans we all depend on.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

¹ a theory that argues events and stages of society and history tend to repeat themselves in cycles

² a pessimistic outlook on a nation or society's future

Main image



Benjamin Ash is the Spring 2025 Dean's Medalist for the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU