

IMPRIMIS

23rd
year

575,000 subscribers

"Hillsdale College and the Western Tradition: Exploring the Roots of Freedom"

by Robert W. Blackstock
Vice President for Admissions, Hillsdale College

Robert W. Blackstock is vice president for admissions and associate professor of law at Hillsdale College. He has taught at Hillsdale since 1977 and has been twice named "Professor of the Year." He is founder of the Hills-

dale Hostel program, a summer seminar series for adults that explores the roots of American freedom, and he is also chancellor of the Anglican Diocese of the Southwest.

In addition, Dr. Blackstock has practiced law and published articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Journal of Business*

and *Economic Perspectives*, and other sources. He received his bachelor of science degree from Lake Superior State University and his juris doctor degree from Ohio Northern University's Pettit School of Law. ▲



How much America has depended on the Western tradition and how much it stands to lose now that this tradition is under assault is the subject of this thoughtful essay by Hillsdale College Vice President Robert W. Blackstock. His remarks were delivered during Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "The Quest for Freedom: Celebrating 150 Years at Hillsdale College," in September of 1994.

The last two hundred years of freedom and prosperity in America, and our success in pulling together as one united people, have been the direct result of the Western tradition and the ideas, habits, customs, prescriptions, and views it embraces. In addition, that tradition has provided us with a common vision and shared ideals; a cultural heritage and heroes that speak to all men in all conditions; a strong sense of community and responsibility; and a national consensus on important matters of governance. I am not claiming, of course, that the Western tradition is the only tradition or the only worthy one; indeed, there are many, and one of the West's strengths has been its willingness to borrow and adapt the good ideas of others. But the ideas of the West are without equal in the world, and we ignore them at our peril.



“Ideas Have Consequences”

As University of Chicago Professor Richard Weaver observed almost half a century ago, and as we are fond of repeating at Hillsdale College, “Ideas have consequences.” And, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, good ideas generally have good consequences, and bad ideas have bad consequences. People generally act consistently with the ideas they embrace, and just as a properly formed set of ideas lead to strength and balance, a poorly formed set of ideas will lead to weakness, imbalance, chaos, tragedy, tyranny, and even infamy.

And as Hillsdale College President George Roche has said, “Ideas rule the world.” How else can we possibly explain, for example, the post-war record of the Japanese who, with almost no natural resources, have enjoyed a rapidly rising standard of living, while the Russians, with almost boundless natural resources, have suffered levels of poverty and deprivation that are most commonly associated with Third World countries?

The difference is that the Japanese system, patterned in many ways after the American system, is to a greater degree built on freedom, and unleashes the great creative powers of the human mind. The former Soviet system, on the other hand, could not have been better designed to oppress the individual, crush the human spirit, and stifle the creative impulse.

It is clear, then, that the ideas we embrace

as individuals and as a people profoundly affect the lives we lead. They determine the goals we set and the tools we will use to reach those goals. They tell us what is worthy and true. They determine how we view ourselves and our world, and they show us what we can become. In important ways, our dreams and our ideas foretell what we will make of ourselves and our world.

The Fabric of the Western Tradition

At the national level, something else has become abundantly clear over the past few years: Although one set of ideas has led America to greatness over most of its history, quite a different set of ideas lead us as a people today. I refer to these older ideas as the “ideas of freedom.” They are the core of the Western tradition and were once part and parcel of every American’s vocabulary as well as their emotional, philosophical, and intellectual makeup.

They are not perfect ideas, but they are undeniably good; in many ways, they are the best set of ideas the world has ever known. For the great sweep of human history and, in fact, until very recently, most men lived in or near poverty and under the thumb of oppressive government. But they were finally liberated by a set of ideas that found their first full expression in the experiment in self-government that began in America in the late 18th century and soon spread throughout the West. No other set

of ideas and no other tradition has done so much for the human condition before or since.

Think of these ideas as an intricate and marvelous fabric—more nearly a rough tweed than a fine silk. So, for instance, the threads that constitute justice will be woven together differently in Britain than in the United States, and differently still in France or Germany, but they will be the same threads, and they still constitute justice. What are some of these ideas?

The ideas of the Western tradition date back at least six thousand years to a developing concept of justice found in the Code of Hammurabi, dating from about 2250 B.C., and in the Jewish tradition, dating from about 4000 B.C. The ancient Greeks and Romans picked up this “new” notion of justice and added to it a commitment to truth and virtue, and they began a dialogue on governance. Judeo-Christian thought and doctrine in turn embraced the ancients’ commitment to justice, truth, and virtue and added a coherent sense of morality.

We also find in Christianity an unprecedented respect for the individual. In an era when life was held cheap, and women and children, as well as slaves, were mere property, Christ, the “Just one,” insisted that all human beings are of infinite value in the eyes of their Creator and that they ought to be treated equally in the eyes of the law.

In the 17th century, the English political philosopher John Locke integrated another “thread” into the Western tradition: the idea of representative, limited government. And almost one hundred years later, Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith described the miracle of free markets and the “invisible hand” of the marketplace that combines men’s natural self-interests with their equally natural “fellow-feeling” for others. About the same time Smith was writing his epic *Wealth of Nations*, Irish-born statesman Edmund Burke was presenting, in effect, the case for conservatism—the need to avoid simplistic ideologies that ignore the ever-changing complexities of life and to build civilization using a synthesis of ancient prescriptions in conjunction with reason, prudence, tradition, and experience.

Of course, many thinkers helped develop these ideas. What began with Hammurabi and the Hebrew religion took additional shape with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Cicero and the Stoics had a hand, as did Marcus Aurelius. St. Augustine and St. Aquinas played a part, as did countless others.

Moreover, the development of these ideas was not always smooth, consistent, or straightforward. Depending on how you read him,

Plato may have been the world’s first totalitarian, yet he set the stage for truly productive dialogue on governance. Even as he wrote his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius was feeding Christians to the lions. Along the way, Thomas à Becket was murdered in the cathedral and Sir Thomas More was beheaded. And in the American experience, we permitted the abomination of slavery to plague our nation for almost ninety years.

Nonetheless, as tumultuous and uneven as their development may have been, these are the ideas that, after centuries of development, correction, and refinement, ultimately led the world to prosperity and freedom. By the time of the American founding, they were woven together into a seamless and integrated body of thought that, while still imperfect, sustained the greatest political, economic, scientific, and technological advances in all history. And they supported and made room for the richness of our many ethnic and cultural differences and celebrated our individuality and diversity—all in the name of freedom.

Political Correctness and the Assault on the Western Tradition

It is nothing less than astonishing that these ideas—which took six thousand years of painful trial and error to develop—are now being cast aside as so much rubbish. “Political correctness” and all its works are arrogant assaults on the Western tradition. Sometimes the assault has been direct, as when, several years ago, Reverend Jesse Jackson led Stanford University students and faculty in the chant, “Hey hey, ho ho, Western Civ has got to go.” Sometimes it has been more subtle, as when “educational experts” and government bureaucrats have sought to diminish these ideas through “diversity” and “multiculturalism” in the curriculum at the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels.

By casting doubt on the Western tradition, they are also casting doubt on the key institutions and principles it has inspired:

limited, constitutional government;
private property and free markets;
equal justice before the law;
traditional morality;
and commitment to truth and excellence.

As hard as it may be to believe, these institutions and principles *are* at risk since the fundamental ideas on which they are based are denied by growing numbers of the political and academic elite.

It is no surprise, in this context, that our freedoms are being eroded and that government has become not only “Big Brother” but what social critic Charles Sykes calls “Big Nanny.” After the heroic struggle of our ancestors to create this land of freedom, we are in danger of becoming emasculated shadows of our former selves—without sufficient reserves of character, strength, or virtue to live independent of government. How far we have come from the ancients’ pursuit of the heroic and the ideal! How far we have come from our own heroic roots!

Character and Freedom

Imagine that you have been charged with governing two islands. Noting that the first duty of a governor is to maintain good order, you survey your kingdom to find what manner of people reside there.

On one island, you find citizens who are good and decent. They cherish family and hard work, and they honor contracts and property. On the other island, you find that the inhabitants are given over to, at best, personal gratification and sloth and, at worst, treachery, deceit, and violence. They do not cherish or nurture family; they do not respect hard work; and they do not honor property or contracts.

As you look into the future, which of these two islands will know the greater freedom? The greater prosperity? And conversely, to maintain good order, which will require the greater number of laws, policemen, and prisons—the more obnoxious manner of enforcement?

I would make at this juncture, two points: first, too many of us have come to take our prosperity for granted; and second, too few of us understand the relationship between character and freedom. The “big government” crowd in Washington in particular seems to believe that wealth “just happens,” and that a healthy society can be manufactured with a mix of government programs and any old set of ideas and values. They condemn the Western tradition as the “ethnocentric,” “imperialistic,” “oppressive,” and “obsolete” legacy of “dead, white males.” They might be willing to go so far as to agree that, ultimately, it is the character of our people that will determine the fate of our nation, but they seem to have little or no notion of how to encourage the *right* kind of character.

To remain free, a people must be *good*; in other words, they must be naturally inclined to good order, healthy views, balanced appetites, and constructive habits. They must be given over, said Edmund Burke, to “good manners and gentle ways.” If they are not, with every act of treachery, deceit, and violence, there will be calls for new laws. And with every new law, we will lose one more precious bit of our freedom. It becomes more difficult for us to use what the poet T.S. Eliot called the “moral imagination” in the raising of our children, in the earning of our bread, and in the conduct of our lives. And it also becomes that much more difficult to bring ourselves, our energies, and our talents to bear on this world as a force for good and to serve our brother’s needs and our own.

The Western tradition has proved to be the most effective encouragement of good citizenship and sound character the world has ever seen. It instructs us in the value of human life, the rule of law, and freedom. Throughout all of history, it has been a shining beacon. At least six thousand years in the making, it has led mankind out of the darkness of barbarism and into the light of civilization.

The Beacon Justice

This beacon, while sometimes dimly perceived, has been understood to represent truth, goodness, righteousness, and fairness—what may be called, in a word, *justice*. Even today, almost as a whisper from the past, most dictionaries still define justice as “fairness” and “moral or absolute rightness.”

Are we Americans a just people today—a righteous and fair people? The general moral climate in America is not encouraging, and even our commitment to fairness has suffered greatly in recent years. There are countless measures of the decay of our character. Crime, drug abuse, illegitimacy, and divorce are on the rise while academic achievement, job performance, civic responsibility, and cultural tastes have plummeted.

Less and less, it seems, do we depend on the values and ideas of the Western tradition as the basis of our actions and more and more do we look to personal gratification, moral relativism, and the cult of the “Now.” Even worse, we allow our children to be taught that this is all there is to life—they don’t even know what the Western tradition is, much less why it is important. In all this is much reason for concern.

Without a commitment to justice and to other tenets of the Western tradition, what

compelling reason do we have to be fair in our dealings with others? Why should we ensure that justice is administered impartially? Why should we regard individuals on the basis of merit instead of on the basis of their race, gender, or class status? Why should we hold individuals accountable for their actions? Why should we limit government or bother to fulfill our responsibilities as citizens?

And why should we live together in relative peace, emphasizing our common bonds rather than our differences? Our founders' aim was to build *E pluribus unum*—one from many. In our misplaced sense of guilt and our distorted sense of justice, we as a nation threaten to take that heritage of unity and build many nations from one. Our pursuit of justice has not been without error. Slavery and bigotry are ugly reminders that we see truth and justice only dimly and that we require a standard against which to measure our conduct and beliefs. For thousands of years, that standard has been an historical and traditional concept of justice.

As we turn our attention to all these questions, we must remember that the problems of our age are, ultimately, spiritual. Truth, goodness, righteousness, and justice have meaning and authority over us only if they are the demands of an authority higher than ourselves. If they are not struck by the hand of God, then they are no more than what the Bible calls “tinkling cymbals and sounding brass.” And as important as it is to resist shameless usurpation of power by the big-government crowd in Washington, it is also important to recognize that in the long run, our freedom will not be secured in a debate over health care or any other political issue—it will be won in a debate over the nature of man.

The Synthesis of Diverse Ideas

Our growing difficulties as a society have resulted from our gradual abandonment of the ideas that raised us to greatness. Unprecedented freedom and prosperity may be the marvelous by-products of the Western tradition, but what should actually command our attention and our respect is the synthesis of its ideas. The real triumph of the Western tradition lies in taking diverse and seemingly inconsistent bodies of knowledge—bodies of knowledge that often appear to be at great odds with one another—and weaving them into a pattern of ideas that harmonizes and gives strength to its components and that speaks to the human mind and soul in a way that elevates not only the individ-

ual but an entire civilization.

We must ask ourselves what type of education produces human beings that can grapple with ideas in such a way as to lead mankind out of the mire of poverty and despair. Our search begins in the past: What kind of education enabled the ancients to uncover so many facets of the human experience and of the very nature of our humanity? What kind of education permitted them to take the Greek pursuit of the ideal and recognize, in the Jewish and Christian faiths, the embodiment of that ideal? How were they able to take the essential fatalism of Greek and Roman philosophy and shine upon it the light of faith?

The Dialectic—“What Should We Do?”

The ancients were not perfect, but their education gave them a tool that we, as a civilization, no longer possess in any considerable measure. This wonderful tool, a product of their education, was the classical practice of the *dialectic*—the ongoing dialogue about any and all questions of interest—the result of what Cardinal Newman called “a philosophic habit of mind.”

I mentioned that Plato may have been the world's first totalitarian, but it is because of the dialogue begun by Plato and Socrates thousands of years ago that we ultimately came to throw off the tyranny of oppressive government. And through this dialectic (which must not be confused with Marx's dialectical materialism) the ancients vigorously questioned not only “what is,” but “what ought to be,” and not just “what are we doing?” but “what should we do?”

This is why the Western tradition has always vigorously defended free speech and open inquiry. Only by asking the “normative” questions—by asking what ought we to do and by exposing the most basic issues to the light of free and open deliberation—can we as individuals or as a society hope to prosper.

Part of our dilemma as a society today is that, in abandoning traditional education, we, as a people, have forgotten these questions as well as the hard-won lessons they taught. But more troublesome still is the fact that, having forgotten the lessons of the past, we have also abandoned the intellectual tools needed to restore them. We have lost the rich backdrop of past inquiries that, if remembered, would have enabled us to move on. Instead, we are left, even at this late date, arguing the fundamen-

tals: that character and decency matter; that truth exists and can be taught; that big government is destructive of a spontaneous and free social order. And in abandoning the literature of the West, we have lost our shared heroes and ideals that once bound us together as one people in the pursuit of shared goals.

Hillsdale College Defends the Western Tradition

Hillsdale College is built firmly on the Western tradition. For a century and a half, it has remained true to its mission statement, which today reads:

Hillsdale College is an independent, non-sectarian institution of higher learning founded in 1844 by men and women “grateful to God for the inestimable blessings” resulting from civil and religious liberty and “believing that the diffusion of learning is essential to the perpetuity of these blessings.” It pursues the stated object of the founders: “to furnish all persons who wish, irrespective of nation, color, or sex, a literary and scientific education” outstanding among American colleges and to combine with this such moral “and social instruction as will best develop the minds and improve the hearts of its pupils.”

The College considers itself a trustee of modern man’s intellectual and spiritual inheritance from the Judeo-Christian faith and Greco-Roman culture, a heritage finding its clearest expression in the American experiment of self-government under law.

By training the young in the liberal arts, Hillsdale College prepares students to become leaders worthy of that legacy. By encouraging scholarship of its faculty, it contributes to the preservation of that legacy for future generations. By publicly defending that legacy, it enlists the aid of other friends of free civilization and thus secures the conditions of its own survival and independence.

Hillsdale College, along with all the world, is a beneficiary of the Western tradition, but it is more than that—it is also an active defender, willing to put its entire existence on the line, if necessary. The College’s history is filled with instances in which it has done so, most notably represented by its 150-year refusal to accept federal funds or federal control.

In the traditional liberal arts education we offer on campus, and in different venues like *Imprimis* for our supporters around the country, we seek to share the very best of the Western

tradition. We also urge Americans once again to embrace a proven and reliable form of education and inquiry, an education that is steadfast in its pursuit of truth and that does not subjugate honest and open inquiry to the pet causes of the political elite.

We call for the re-establishment of a form of education that will again enable us to



approach our problems honestly and effectively, to examine mankind and thus gain meaningful understanding. This is the method that lies at the heart of the liberal arts, a method of inquiry as old as antiquity itself.

So, Hillsdale’s message to the nation is this: Let us first take our bearings, assess our condition, and determine our common goals—and let us do so with an unwavering commitment to truth. Let us also conduct a careful examination of first principles—a close study of the basic assumptions that inform our world views, our beliefs, and our actions. In other words, we must revisit the ancient prescriptions—the institutions and precepts upon which our forefathers built their successes. Of course, they made mistakes, and yes, they lived in a time that was in some ways different from ours. But

much of what they did and knew is indeed timeless and holds as true for us today as it did for them.

Hillsdale's most important task is educating the students in its charge, but it also seeks to educate a wider audience. What are some of the lessons it seeks to teach? That we must re-establish a consensus about our aims as a free society. That we must understand what is at stake in the struggle for freedom. That we must appreciate the foundational ideas upon which our freedom and bounty rest. And, furthermore, we must declare to all the world with unshakable conviction and confidence that:

there is truth, goodness, righteousness, and justice;

all values are not equal, and all social orders are not benign;

America is coasting on a momentum built up in the past, and that momentum is slowing;

the hope of this world lies in a redeemed America that once again understands and values freedom and respects the dignity of the individual;

we will continue to lose our freedom and prosperity, our dignity, and our individuality almost in direct proportion to the growth of our government.

Hillsdale College remains a storehouse of the ideas of the Western tradition. We, the faculty, staff, and students, are committed to the traditional goal of education—the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, and with the ancients, we see it as our duty to continue the endless search for truth.

We cannot redirect the hearts and minds of our countrymen by force or by law. We must win them over with the fire of our ideas. Our answer must be found in a newly regenerate clarity of thought and purpose and in a willingness to take the ideas of freedom boldly into the public square. ▲

✓ **boxes for more information:**

- On-campus seminars of Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives
- Off-campus seminars of Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership
- Student Admissions
- Gift and Estate Planning or Hillsdale Hostel (1-800-334-8904)
- Freedom Library books and tapes
- FreedomQuest Campaign
- Dow Leadership Development Center

Enclosed is my tax deductible contribution to Hillsdale College for:
 \$ _____

Do you know students interested in admission to Hillsdale College? We'll lend them a video for free! To order "Hillsdale College Video Visit," call 1-800-255-0384.

(Orders only please—not an information line.)

Imprimis: (1-10 copies \$.75 each
 25-\$10 50-\$15 100-\$25)

Qty.	Author/Title	Price
		Subtotal
		Michigan residents, add 6% sales tax
		Total

FREE SHIPPING!

(Please make checks payable to Hillsdale College)

**Credit Card Donations/
 Orders Welcome!**

VISA / MC / Discover

Exp. mo/yr

Signature _____