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The Thin Red Line of Heroes

George Roche
President, Hillsdale College

George Roche has served as president of Hillsdale College since 1971. Formerly the presidentially appointed chairman of the National Council on Education Research, the director of seminars at the Foundation for Economic Education, a professor of history at the Colorado School of Mines, and a U.S. Marine, he is the author of 13 books, including six Conservative Book Club selections.



One well-known title, *The Fall of the Ivory Tower: Government Funding, Corruption, and the Bankrupting of American Higher Education*, received coverage

in *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Reader's Digest*. In a 1994 cover story, *Insight* editors named it "Book of the Year."

In February 1998, Regnery Publishing is releasing his latest title, *The Book of Heroes: Great Men and Women in American History*. ▲

In a special preview of his new book, The Book of Heroes: Great Men and Women in American History (Regnery Publishing, February 1998), Hillsdale College President George Roche tells the story of George Washington, pioneer, farmer, soldier, and president.

He not only provides fascinating, little-known details about the life of this great American but reminds us of the heroic vision we once widely shared—that is, before the "demythologizers" in the media and the academy reduced the past to a dreary, oppressive contest between special interest groups.

The Last Line of Defense

The collective myth is failing in education, politics, economics—failing in every aspect of our lives. The time has come to reclaim the American dream, to reassert the values of free men and free institutions, to rediscover the spiritual roots of personal responsibility and integrity that built this country. The ideas are in place for a new renaissance. We know what needs to be done. What we need today is the leadership to carry out the task. In a word, America needs its heroes as never before.

"The thin red line" is an expression often used in literature to describe soldiers on the front who are faced with overwhelming odds. The word "red" refers to the color of the uniforms worn by some of the most famous soldiers of all, British infantrymen in the 18th century.

The thin red line is the last line of defense. It is the line drawn between civilization and barbarism. And the only way to hold the line is to teach our young men and women the right values and the right attitudes. This means teaching them to appreciate what Rudyard Kipling once called the “thin red line of heroes.”

Heroes have deeply influenced my personal life. They have helped me define ideas like honor, duty, truth, honesty, compassion, self-discipline, and sacrifice. These are the ideas that are the bedrock of our society. Unfortunately, they are also ideas that we don’t hear very much about these days.

Such a theme is especially important just now at the end of the century. There is a heroic dimension to life that we must pass on to our children.

I recently finished a book, intended mainly for high school and college students, on the character of six American heroes: George Washington, Daniel Boone, Louisa May Alcott, George Washington Carver, Robert E. Lee and Andrew Carnegie.

Recapturing the American Character

There are other heroes I might have selected, but these clearly reflect the character of an older America. And this leads us to the real question of our time: Can we recapture that American character for the next century? To do so, we must rediscover the heroic vision that has been lost or at least obscured for the last several decades. We have been living in the age of the anti-hero for far too long.

Every index of our society shows the terrible price we have paid. Look at our schools, popular culture, or crime statistics. I could offer literally hundreds of examples of the failure of the anti-heroic vision. It is very easy to find cause for pessimism and despair in our present society.

But I am here to ask the questions everyone should be asking at this moment: What is a hero? What do heroes have to teach us? I believe that when we find the answers we will learn how to address the most pressing problems we face as individuals and as a nation.

George Washington’s Rules for Life

First and foremost among my heroes is George Washington: citizen, patriot, risk-taker, leader. He used to be every schoolchild’s hero. But he seldom earns more than a passing mention these days. The greatest American of all time has become just another dead white male.

George did not cut down a cherry tree with a hatchet and confess the deed to his father by saying, “I cannot tell a lie.” That is just a legend. But this man’s real deeds turn out to be far more amazing than any of the tall tales that have been told about him.

He was born in 1732 on a small, struggling tobacco farm in Virginia. His father died when he was eleven, and he had to work to help the family make ends meet. As a young boy, he also had to memorize over 100 rules of conduct devised by French Catholic monks. Here are a few examples:

Speak not when you should hold your peace.

Always submit your judgment to others with modesty.

Be not hasty to believe flying reports to the disparagement of any.

Let your conversation be without malice or envy. . . .

When you speak of God or His attributes, let it be seriously. . . .

Let your recreations be manful, not sinful.

Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

He didn’t forget these rules or outgrow them. They were rules for life, and they were not just about common courtesy but about developing moral character and moral discipline.

The Testing Ground of Experience

By age 15, he was already working as a professional surveyor far beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. The wilderness had a profound impact on him. It tested his mettle and endurance, forced him to improvise to meet unexpected challenges, and opened wide new vistas in his imagination. He was filled with the restless longing of the pioneer—and, if it were not for his family obligations back home in Virginia, he undoubtedly would have become a legendary woodsman and explorer like his contemporary, Daniel Boone.

By age 21, he was a major in the colonial army. He fought during the French and Indian War, and his bravery made him a living legend. In one battle, he had two mounts shot out from under

him, and his hat and uniform were riddled with bullet holes.

In 1775, after the first shots between the Redcoats and the Minutemen were fired at Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress unanimously elected George as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. Why?

He was not a general. He was just a simple country farmer who happened to have some limited military experience. He did not enjoy a reputation as a powerful politician or a great orator.

At 43, he was also far too young for such an awesome responsibility. But he was the type of man who never quit, no matter how difficult the odds. If the American cause had to rest on the shoulders of one man, the delegates knew unquestionably that the man had to be George Washington.

A Hopeless Cause

He was facing a hopeless cause. The Continentals had no trained soldiers, no money, no ammunition, no weapons, and no supplies. Yet they were about to take on the greatest army in the world. Britain was a superpower. George, however, found ingenious ways to make America's great liabilities into assets. And as a commander, he was bold, decisive, and strategically brilliant. Moreover, he inspired his men by setting a personal example of bravery on the battlefield and endurance in camp. He lived in the same conditions as his men. He suffered the same cold, hunger, and pain.

There is no question that the army would have deserted en masse at Valley Forge if it had not been for George. Think about that for a moment. What kind of man could command such devotion?

The War for Independence was essentially won in 1781 after George pulled off a stunning surprise attack at Yorktown. But his army couldn't be disbanded until a treaty was signed. His men were furious; they couldn't return to plant crops and care for their families. Worse yet, most of them hadn't been paid for two years.

It is hard to believe, but as late as March of 1783 they were still marooned in a dirty, crowded camp in Newburgh, New York. Congress continued to turn a deaf ear to George's pleas that the men be paid or discharged. It wasn't just the enlisted men who were grumbling about this shameful ill-treatment. Scores of officers were cir-

culating anonymous pamphlets calling for mutiny. The rag-tag army had won the war, but now it stood to lose the peace. It looked as though the American experiment would be over before it had really begun, and the nation would be plunged into bloody civil war.

Then George performed one last desperate act. He showed up unexpectedly at a secret meeting that was designed to launch the mutiny. He asked if he could speak and was reluctantly given the floor. He called for his officers to be patient just a little while longer. He reminded them that the

army could not be a law unto itself. He also pointed out that they had fought together to institute democracy, not a new kind of tyranny. And he concluded by saying, "I have a letter here from a congressman that will prove the good faith of our government." He drew the parchment from his pocket and unfolded it.

But the light in the tavern was too dim for him to make out the words. With a trembling hand, he fumbled for his glasses. He hated them and had never worn them in public before.

In a deeply mortified tone, he apologized, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country."

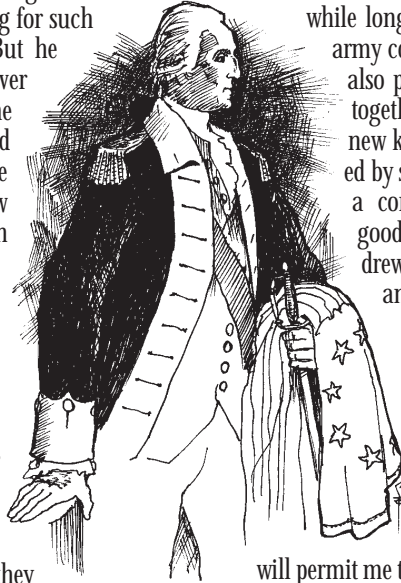
He started to read the letter, but he couldn't speak. His voice, as well as his composure, deserted him. He stalked out of the room without uttering another word.

The officers were all hardened soldiers who had witnessed terrible sights without flinching. But, seeing their beloved commander reduced to such a state, they began to weep openly. They immediately pledged to follow orders and quell all attempts at mutiny. Once again, George Washington had saved the new nation from destruction.

The Father of Our Country

This single incident speaks volumes about our nation's greatest hero. He went on to become the first President of the United States in 1799. In fact, the drafters of the Constitution had him specifically in mind when they created the office.

George risked everything and gave up his private life once more to lead the struggling new



nation, which was bankrupt, disorganized, and weak. He himself said that being the first president was like “entering upon an unexplored field, enveloped on every side with clouds and darkness.” He even confessed to a friend that he felt like a condemned man being sent to the gallows, but duty could not be denied.

Above all, George was keenly aware that forming “a new government requires infinite care,” and that his actions as president would establish important precedents. In a letter written near the end of the Revolution, he acknowledged that “we have a national character to establish” and added that it should rest “on permanent principles.” The two principles he named were justice and gratitude. His own dedication to these principles would be severely tested during his eight years as America’s first chief executive. But he turned out to be the most successful president in American history. Here is a brief list of his accomplishments:

- He enforced the separation of powers and used the presidential veto to protect the Constitution.
- He straightened out the nation’s finances, calling for full repayment of the Revolutionary war debt, frugal spending, a balanced budget, and low taxes.
- He advocated a simple code of legal justice that the common man could understand. He undertook the task of educating literally thousands of citizens about the Constitution, which was the new law of the land.
- He sought equal treatment for Indians on par with whites in the courts. And in his will he freed the slaves he had inherited from his family.
- He defended religion and morality as what he called the “twin pillars” of the free society. His diaries and letters are filled with references to his strong personal faith. He also defended religious freedom and tolerance for such traditionally persecuted groups as the Baptists, Roman Catholics, Quakers, and Jews.

- He was a peacemaker. When two rival political parties formed, he made sure that he had representatives of both in his cabinet. Avoiding bitter factionalism was one of his strongest concerns. He constantly wrote letters to quarreling politicians in which he recited the virtues of trust, patience, and forgiveness.

- He was a war hero who hated war. He harbored no romantic illusions about soldiering. Therefore, he established a foreign policy based on strict neutrality and, despite considerable pressures, kept his administration free from “entangling alliances” with other nations.

By giving his awesome political power back to the people who had entrusted it to him, George gained something far greater than the power any king ever possessed: He became the father, not just of a country but of the greatest experiment in freedom the world has ever known.

The Father of Our Freedom

His refusal to accept a third term was an extraordinary historical event. That a ruler would voluntarily hand over the reins of government to another was almost unthinkable; it had rarely ever happened in all human history. By giving his awesome political power back to the people who had entrusted it to him, George gained something far greater than

the power any king ever possessed: He became the father not just of a country but of the greatest experiment in freedom the world has ever known.

George bitterly regretted the fact that he had no children of his own. But since he was the “father of our country,” we are all rightly his heirs. He has also been called the “indispensable man.” Without him, we might not have won our independence. Without him, our republic might not have survived. Without him, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights might not have been written.

He showed us the tremendous power of one individual. He created not only a model for the chief executive but a model for every citizen. He was the living embodiment of what it means to be an American. There will never be another George Washington, but we should all aspire to be like him. ▲

Adam Smith Award Acceptance Remarks

William E. Simon

*Chairman, William E. Simon & Sons, LLC
President, John M. Olin Foundation, Inc.*

At Hillsdale's October 1997 Shavano Institute for National Leadership 15th anniversary celebration in Colorado Springs, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury William E. Simon received the Adam Smith Award. His remarks were such a moving testimonial to the mission and legacy of Hillsdale College that we would like to share them with our readers.

A U. S. Army veteran, William E. Simon has enjoyed an extraordinary career: senior partner and a member of the executive committee at Salomon Brothers; first administrator of the Federal Energy Office; deputy secretary of the treasury; secretary of the U. S. Treasury under two presidents; author of two best-selling books, and co-founder of Wesray Corporation, WSGP International, and William E. Simon & Sons.



He has served on the boards of over 30 companies, including Xerox, Citibank, and United Technologies, and has been an active member of the U.S. Olympic Committee for over three decades, serving as president from 1980 to 1984.

A volunteer at Covenant House and a Eucharistic minister to patients at four hospitals, he has made a personal commitment to serve the sick and the poor. He is also a well-known philanthropist and has created hundreds of scholarships for underprivileged students at elementary school, high school, and college levels.

In addition, Mr. Simon serves as the president of the John M. Olin Foundation, as a trustee of the John Templeton Foundation and as past president of the U.S. Olympic Foundation. ▲

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be with my old friend, George Roche, and with the many wonderful friends of Hillsdale.

I am certainly honored to join the illustrious company of President Ronald Reagan and Sir John Templeton as a recipient of the Adam Smith Award. I can assure you that receiving it means every bit as much to me as receiving an MVP award would mean to a professional athlete.

Best of all, of course, is the prospect of returning to Hillsdale's board of trustees and renewing my formal association with the College as we inaugurate the William E. Simon Chair in Economics and Political Economy and the William E. Simon Scholarship Fund. The challenge grants for these programs will match, dollar for dollar, contributions from other interested leaders around the country.

But let me speak for a moment about the man at the helm, George Roche, who has guided Hillsdale so wisely and well and who has brought it to its current leadership position.

I first met George Roche over two decades ago and, over the years, I have come to know him as a great patriot as well as a courageous educational leader who has led Hillsdale with heroic resolve, onward and upward. Today, his college stands, much like his favorite Mount Shavano, at a peak of recognition.

To cite just a few examples, in the most recent *U. S. News & World Report* survey of the 25 leading Midwest regional liberal arts colleges, Hillsdale ranked second. What's more, Hillsdale was a winner in three categories of the prestigious Templeton Honor Rolls for Education in a Free Society, which earlier this year honored the finest institutions, educators, programs, and textbooks in American higher education today. Honorees were selected by a distinguished executive committee of Nobel laureates, former cabinet officials, and other seminal thinkers who studied over 1,500 nominations and selected 125 winners.

For Hillsdale to receive three awards is a remarkable achievement, placing the College shoulder to shoulder with the finest academic institutions in the country. Of course, the higher Hillsdale rises among its peers, the more powerful it becomes. Today, it is recognized across America as a beacon of truth, academic excellence, and unswerving independence.

Clearly, we know why this is so. Hillsdale has stood for teaching those first principles that have helped create the freest, most prosperous country in the history of the world.

This has been possible because, unlike the majority of schools which claim to be independent,

but, in point of fact, bow to another master, Hillsdale has had the courage to say “no” to government funding. Consequently, it has been able to say “yes” to academic freedom—genuine, academic freedom.

Hillsdale professors teach courses the way they should be taught—not by politicizing scholarship, but by insisting on true balance and objectivity—which means, for example, encouraging their students to read Adam Smith, F. A. Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and George Stigler, as well as Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Robert Reich.

In this way, Hillsdale is proving it is still possible to have the courage of your convictions in America at a time when words like “principled stand” have become a national oxymoron.

And, frankly, that is what sets Hillsdale apart from the crowd of politically correct schools—yes, Hillsdale truly does have convictions. It believes, both passionately and wholeheartedly, that the purpose of an education is not just to produce enlightened citizens and to provide jobs for graduates and leaders for enterprise—important as those objectives certainly are. No, there is a higher, more enduring purpose of an education. And that purpose is to both acknowledge our gratitude to God our creator for His gifts of life and liberty and to develop our minds and hearts so that we may perpetuate those freedoms from which our blessings flow.

Let me interject another message here, which is that, yes, we do have a God and, yes, we do have a God-given right to pray. Nothing so mystified and angered me as when our Supreme Court outlawed prayer in public schools.

James Madison, the brilliant architect of our Constitution, warned us that only a well-instructed people can remain a permanently free people. That is why Hillsdale continues to treasure our heritage and history at the very time when so many leaders in higher education are so eager to trash them.

In an era when administrators readily bow to shrill cries of “racism, sexism, and imperialism” by decimating the traditional curriculum—in many cases, even eliminating the term “Western” entirely—Hillsdale strongly believes students must understand and appreciate their own heritage before they can understand others. And so, Hillsdale has a core curriculum. Every student at Hillsdale is required to take two foundation courses—“The Western Heritage” and “The American Heritage.”

It is fashionable to renounce core disciplines for the bizarre, frivolous, and faddish—for courses like “Paranoia, Politics, and Other Pleasures”—but

Hillsdale students must still be grounded in great works of literature, art, and history. They must still be able to master the basic laws of science and mathematics that govern the universe. And they are still being prepared to compete and succeed in a world of advancing technologies and rapid-fire change that rewards those who can think, write, and express themselves most clearly and cogently.

All the while, Hillsdale continues to set academic benchmarks and distinguish itself in truly remarkable ways.

It does not sacrifice excellence. Its SAT scores continue to rise and its professors are among the finest in America. What’s more, it publishes the wonderful speech digest, *Imprimis*, and attracts speakers of such renown to its campus and off-campus programs that its roster reads like a veritable “Who’s Who” of the intellectual movers and shakers of America.

My, what a very special place! Hillsdale is a citadel of courage and a place for the meeting of minds, where ideas promoting freedom are born, nurtured, developed, and then sent out to change the world.

Ideas presented at Hillsdale, which may have seemed radical at the time, have progressed from the thought-stream of intellectual conservatism to the mainstream of American life.

Such ideas include those of Adam Smith, after whom this award is named. As you know, Adam Smith was the author of one of the two revolutionary documents published in that remarkable year, 1776. While Thomas Jefferson was writing the Declaration of Independence on the other side of the Atlantic, the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith was writing *Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s proposition was every bit as revolutionary as Jefferson’s, teaching us that the wealth of nations is not a fixed sum game and that wealth can be generated wherever human creativity and enterprise are unleashed and unhampered by the heavy hand of government.

Together across the miles, the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and Adam Smith not only transformed our political landscape but also revived the American spirit, rekindled the great power and productivity that makes ours the strongest economy in the world, and gave new momentum to all of Western civilization.

Yes, freedom is winning. Freedom is bursting out all over the world, and that makes this an incredibly exciting time to be alive. These are some of the reasons why I am so proud to be inaugurating the Simon Chair and Scholarship program at Hillsdale. As I said in my deed of gift, the purpose of my endowed professorship is to pro-



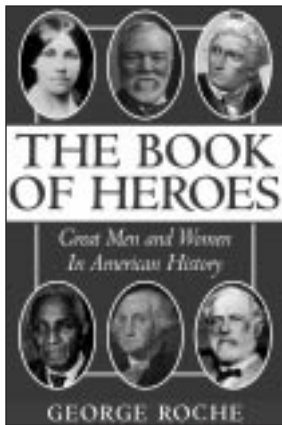
mote a deeper understanding of the bonds between political liberty and economic freedom.

If there is one underlying principle that spans all economic history—but, sadly, one that is all but ignored on too many college campuses—it is the indivisibility of our personal, political, and economic freedoms. Our personal, political, and economic freedoms are inextricably linked. Whenever societies have permitted their economic freedoms to be sacrificed in their desire to seek security, they have inevitably seen their personal and political freedoms sacrificed as well.

The great historian Gibbon described this very outcome in writing of ancient Greece. “In the end,” he wrote, “more than they wanted freedom, they wanted security. They wanted a comfortable life, and they lost it all—security, comfort, and freedom. When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society, but for society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free.”

I am establishing the Simon chair knowing that future occupants will impart these timeless truths to

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their students, who will include, I am sure, many deserving recipients of our scholarship grants—our future Simon scholars. I have every confidence that these wonderful young men and women will then go out and earnestly endeavor to make their mark on the world.

That is what Hillsdale is all about. And that is what we must be about—for if we want to build a future of greater freedom and less government, more of us have to become leaders ourselves.

I mentioned earlier that Hillsdale stands, much like Mount Shavano, at a lofty peak. But it is really a jumping-off point to an even higher peak, reaching up toward the stars. The higher Hillsdale goes, the greater the chances of the rest of America going along.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this great enterprise. And thank you for blessing me with this great honor, which I will treasure.

I am so very proud to be back as a member of the Hillsdale family. Together, we can look forward to turning over to our children, and our children's children, an America that is stronger, better, and freer—economically, financially, morally, and spiritually—than the one we inherited. 🌲



The Adam Smith Award was presented to Mr. Simon by the former head of the Adam Smith Foundation, Kevin Freeman and Hillsdale College President George Roche.



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