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Time to Give Up or Time to Fight On?

An Interview with Larry P. Arnn



LARRY P. ARNN, the twelfth president of Hillsdale College, received his B.A. from Arkansas State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in government from the Claremont Graduate School. From 1977 to 1980, he also studied at the London School of Economics and at Worcester College, Oxford University, where he served as director of research for Martin Gilbert, the official biographer of Winston Churchill. From 1985 until his appointment as president of Hillsdale College in 2000, he was president of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy. He is the author of *Liberty and Learning: The Evolution of American Education* and *The Founders' Key: The Divine and Natural Connection Between the Declaration and the Constitution and What We Risk By Losing It*.

The following is adapted from an interview by Hugh Hewitt for the Hugh Hewitt Radio Show, conducted on the day after the election, November 7, 2012.

HUGH HEWITT: My guest is Larry Arnn, the president of Hillsdale College. Several weeks ago, when I was at Hillsdale, Dr. Arnn warned me that yesterday's election might well go badly for the cause of constitutional conservatism. And I wanted to review the results of the election with him today on the radio show. Larry, welcome.

LARRY P. ARNN: Thank you, Hugh, good to be with you. And it did indeed turn out to be a terrible election from the standpoint of constitutionalism. Its results will bring about hardships and set back the time frame for reviving the kind of government our Founders bequeathed to us. I do agree with that. But I very much disagree with the idea that this election marks a decisive event in our politics, or a point of no return.

HH: That's what I want to discuss, because there are a lot of people who are close to saying "game over," who are tempted now to retreat from politics—to go do missionary work, for instance—and give up on the republic. But you have made your life's work the studying of leaders who have refused to do that.

LPA: That’s right. And the reason you can’t do that, by the way—the reason you can’t retreat into private life and give up on politics—is that the cost of doing it is overwhelming. If you don’t live under good laws, life becomes truncated and less happy, injustice becomes customary, civilization is compromised. And one cannot acquiesce in that. One has to be involved. And since politics is natural to us—man is essentially political, as Aristotle says—and since we do live in the greatest modern country—founded that way at least—we owe it a lot. And many of the people who have seen the republic through to where we are today have gone through things that are worse than this. So first of all, it’s a duty not to give up. But second, there are good reasons to know that the game isn’t over.

HH: What are the reasons?

LPA: One of them is that the election is shot through with contradictions. The obvious contradiction is that we have a divided government. The presidency and the Senate are in the hands of one party, and the House of Representatives and most governorships are in the hands of the other. A second contradiction is that a large majority of people continued to say in the exit polls that they were against raising taxes in order to cut the deficit. One might be cynical and put that down to an irresponsible refusal to pay for existing benefits—to get more and more “free stuff.” But for a long time now, opinion polls have

pointed towards the existence of a broad majority of Americans who favor smaller government. This obviously contradicts the re-election of the president and the Democratic gains in the Senate. The country is still a house divided against itself, and that’s dangerous. But it doesn’t mean that there’s been a resolution. It means in fact the opposite: there is *not* a resolution. That resolution still has to be made, and the making of it lies ahead of us, and not behind us.

HH: Reminding us of the words from scripture that a house divided against itself cannot stand reminds us also of Lincoln. What is the applicability of Lincoln’s situation to our own?

LPA: Lincoln’s argument was that either slavery is right or freedom is right, and that the country couldn’t long stand if it was divided on which was so. There was an argument that slavery should be allowed to spread and be protected as a good thing, and there was an argument that slavery violated America’s principles and should be kept from spreading. There’s almost an exact parallel today, because the people who founded our country believed and wrote—and established a Constitution to provide—that there must never be unlimited rule by any man or group of men over other men. And our government is getting to a place where it threatens to become limitless.

Not only that, but government itself has become a strong force in elections: Much of the money funding the party of big government comes from *inside*

Imprimis (im-pri-mis),
[Latin]: in the first place

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the government through public employee unions—not to mention corporations, so many of which receive a form of welfare from the government. This new development represents a dangerous corruption of the election process—and elections are the only means left to Americans to limit government. It’s a real problem.

HH: Another new form of corruption is what I call the media-industrial complex. We seem to be in uncharted waters now. The Framers of the Constitution were geniuses, but we will see if their wisdom is up to these new challenges.

LPA: Well just think of what our Constitution is doing right now—the protection it is providing. In 1946 in England, following Churchill’s ouster as prime minister, the Labor government got its first outright majority, and within a year it had nationalized 15 or so major industries. It was able to do that all at once. Compare that to what occurred here. President Obama only had that kind of united power for two years, because our Constitution divides power. He did, in his first two years, push through Obamacare and Dodd-Frank, which are significant. They will do a lot of damage, and we are stuck with them for now because of the election. But despite the election, one part of the government remains in the hands of the opposition. That means that no big new legislation is going to go through. So the Constitution is working, despite the uncharted waters you mention.

HH: In his introduction to *The City and Man*, Leo Strauss wrote this:

However much the power of the West may have declined, however great the dangers to the West may be, that decline, that danger, nay, the defeat, even the destruction of the West would not necessarily prove that the West is in a crisis: the West could go down in honor, certain of its purpose. The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose.

An audio version of *Imprimis* is available online at hillsdale.edu/imprimis

Is that applicable to what we see in our politics today?

LPA: It is certainly true that the vast majority of our nation’s elites today—those who welcome the results of yesterday’s election—are creatures of modern historicist thought, which explicitly rejects the kind of objective principles—equality under God, inalienable rights—on which America was founded. According to modern historicism, the only objective truth is that one can’t know an objective truth. President Obama embraces this view in no uncertain terms in his book *The Audacity of Hope*: “Implicit . . . in the very idea of ordered liberty,” he writes, is “a rejection of absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or ‘ism,’ any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single unalterable course . . .” So much for individual rights and limited government.

This view, which drives modern liberalism or Progressivism, has been on the ascendant. But remember when you quote Strauss that his works were intended to constitute a *revival* of the West. The West is heavily besieged from within, but it’s not dead. We are obviously a house divided right now, and I think it’s safe to say that conditions are going to get significantly worse before they get better. But we need to remember why Churchill thought that Hitler could be defeated even when the British had ten or twelve divisions and the Germans had 200, plus three times the air force, and the British stood alone.

For one thing, Churchill thought free men were morally obliged to believe it, in order to go down fighting if necessary. But beyond that, he calculated what the advantages were. And there was a fundamental advantage that is especially important for us to recall today: Churchill believed that Hitler’s kind of government could not work, and thus

that it *would* not work. In other words, he looked at Hitler and he saw weakness—despite Hitler’s great military advantage.

Similarly, Churchill and Ronald Reagan are the two statesmen I know who regarded the Soviet Union as weak, even at the height of its power, because it was built on self-contradictory propositions and its system led to obvious and repeated injustices. Churchill believed that also of the socialist government to which he lost in 1946.

HH: Now Larry, I’ve got to break in here, because I know the media-industrial complex, and someone will go and get the transcription of this and say that you are comparing Obama to Hitler, which you are not doing. What you are talking about is a relative advantage of political forces today, comparing that to the relative advantage in military forces of Hitler vis-à-vis Churchill. You aren’t comparing our government today to the Third Reich.

LPA: No, and I don’t mean that. What I mean is that the principles of Progressivism that animate our government today, which are antithetical to the principles of the American Founding, lead to policies that cannot work, will not work, and result in obvious injustices. That is its weakness, and that provides cause for hope. But by the way, there *is* a parallel with the great twentieth century tyrannies: The modern bureaucratic form of government cannot remain accountable to the people, so in the fullness of time it will become despotic. That’s not the intention of anybody who runs it today, or at least not very many people. But that is its direction.

HH: You mentioned Reagan, who always seemed to know, as Solzhenitsyn knew, that it was all papier-mâché in the Soviet Union—that you could poke a stick through it and it would fall apart. It was held together by fear. But modern bureaucratic government operates in such a way as to gain people’s allegiance and trust. Isn’t that a significant difference between the two?

LPA: The experts who run the modern bureaucratic state think they are architects of a perfectly rational society. They think of themselves as scientists, and of the running of government as something more like science—the science of administration—than politics. They think they can coordinate society comprehensively so that no one is left out. That’s why they think of their work as something good and as something high. The problem is that what they are trying to do defies human nature—the human nature that led James Madison to write famously that men are not angels, and that led the Framers of the Constitution to divide government in order to limit government—and so what these experts are doing will ultimately lead to despotism.

But to speak directly to your question, Hugh, there are many indications that there’s a deep and even intensifying *opposition* to bureaucratic government today. People don’t like it, and they don’t trust it. They want less of it. And I don’t believe that yesterday’s election signified any change in that. Now, how to harness that opinion politically is the challenge. No one yet has been able to capitalize upon it.

HH: What would be your advice as to what constitutional conservatives should be saying?

LPA: One obvious theme to strike is that people didn’t vote for, and don’t support, higher taxes and bigger government. But conservative statesmen have to get better. Calvin Coolidge once said that great statesmen are “ambassadors of providence, sent to reveal to us our unknown selves.” What that means is that great statesmen are not going to be around very often. I’d say that the standard of conservative statesmanship today is improving, but too few prominent conservatives are skillful at explaining the problem of the modern bureaucratic state. This form of government proceeds by rules, and rules upon rules, and compliance with those rules becomes a key activity of the entire nation. That results in bureaucracy, and in the inefficiencies of bureaucracy.

Constitutional government, on the other hand, proceeds by clearly stated laws.

Not grasping this is an important failure of conservative statesmen today. During the first presidential debate I stood up and slapped my leg, and my wife said to sit down and be quiet, when Mitt Romney said that business and prosperity require regulation. What he should have said instead was that of course we require *laws* in order to be productive and to live safely, but that laws are different than regulations. Laws are passed by elected (and thus accountable) representatives, they cover everybody equally, and we can all participate in their enforcement because they are easy to understand. Not one of those three things is true of the regulations imposed by independent boards such as those established under Obamacare and Dodd-Frank. Romney was not able to make that distinction, and yet that distinction is at the heart of the choice Americans must make about how they will be governed.

HH: Larry, Hillsdale College now has a Graduate School of Statesmanship, and you have spent your life studying statesmen. Do we have statesmen now, or people you see who are potentially great statesmen?

LPA: What you look for are the ones who have the music of America in them, and who are also good at learning. It takes both things, and there are some fine young conservatives in Congress and serving as governors who give one hope. They understand the urgency of the situation, and that makes them better.

I was talking to Margaret Thatcher a couple years ago, and she asked about the setbacks American conservatives had been suffering. And I said, “Well ma’am, it’s your fault. You have ruined your successors.” And she said, “How did I do that?” And I told her that when she did what she did, nobody knew if it would work, so it was clear that she

chose it because she believed in it. But the people who’ve come after her—after her and Ronald Reagan, I might have said—many of them chose it because she and Reagan made it work, so they considered it to be the road to success. In other words, a lot of them have been pretenders. But the situation is more urgent now, and there won’t be so many pretenders. The pretenders will jump ship. And that’s a healthy development.

But let me close with a word about Churchill. The service that he did in 1940, when his nation stood up against Hitler alone, was preceded by a service equally great. In the 1930s, British politics were ugly and ill-directed. Churchill’s own party leaders conspired to deprive him not only of his seat in Parliament, but of his livelihood writing for the public. One of his colleagues, an official in the Foreign Ministry named Ralph Wigram, was threatened with transfer to a remote place without medical care—his son had birth defects—if he continued speaking with Churchill. Churchill, Wigram, and Wigram’s wife Ava stood up to this kind of thing, year after year. First a few, and then many, and then legions joined them. Finally the British people realized the truth, and then all over London billboards appeared with the words in large black letters, “What Price Churchill?” He was called to lead in 1940 because he proved in the 1930s that he could do so.

That same year, Churchill asked one of his assistants, John Colville, to find him the precise text of a prayer he remembered from the siege of Gibraltar. It reads:

Fear not the result, for either thy end shall be an enviable and a majestic one, or God will preserve our reign upon the waters.

We might follow Churchill in saying that prayer in hard times. We might cultivate the strength that it can give. ■



DID YOU KNOW?

Throughout 2013, Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn and other members of the Hillsdale faculty will be appearing on the Friday edition of the *Hugh Hewitt Radio Show* to discuss the great works of the West and the renewal of the Western mind. Updates on that series will be provided at hillsdale.edu.