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A Rebirth of Liberty and Learning

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The following is adapted from remarks delivered during a gala event held at Hillsdale College on October 9-10, 2013, to launch a six-year campaign to raise \$470 million for capital and endowment—the Rebirth of Liberty and Learning Campaign.

There is a proper way to educate and there is a proper way to govern, and they are both known. Today we do these things in a different way, which presents a serious and perhaps fatal problem for our country. But repair is possible.

Take education first. The word “education” comes from a Latin word meaning “to lead forth.” And if you think about it, “forth” is a value-laden term. Which way is forth? The Bible tells us to “raise up a child in the way he should go.” But which way should he go? How does one come to know the answer to that? After almost 14 years as a college president I’m an expert on young people between 18 and 22, and I can tell you that if you ask a young person today which way is the right way to go, more often than not he or she will answer: “It depends on which way you want to

go.” Young people today give that answer because they’ve been taught to give that answer. But it’s the *wrong* answer, and the activity of getting from there to the right answer—the activity of coming to know which way is the right way—is education. Thus “to lead forth.”

Two Ways of Education

At Hillsdale College students read a lot of old books, including Plato’s *Republic*. In the *Republic* they read the story of Gyges’ ring—a ring that makes the wearer of it invisible. One of Socrates’ interlocutors in the *Republic*, a young man named Glaucon, raises the question: Why would a man in possession of such a ring not use it to do and obtain whatever he wishes? Why would he not use the ring’s powers, for instance, to become a tyrant? In response, Socrates turns the discussion to another question: What is the right way for a man to live? What is just by nature and what is unjust?

These Socratic questions were once at the center or core of education, and they remain at the center or core of education at Hillsdale College. But in American education as a whole, these questions have been abandoned.

Let me give you two examples of how the new way of education differs from the old. One concerns the use of the word I just used—“core.” Here at Hillsdale we have a core curriculum—a thing most American colleges and universities have watered

down or done away with—which is a core group of courses that all students, regardless of their major, are required to take. A true core, as I’ve described, has a unifying principle, such as the idea that there is a right way to live that one can come to know. Compare that to the use of the same word in describing the latest bright idea of the education establishment—the so-called Common Core—which is an attempt by bureaucrats and politicians to impose national standards on American schools. When one looks into Common Core, it becomes clear that it has no unifying principle in the sense I have described. And it has destructive effects. But the point I want to make here is that its only stated object is career preparation.

Bereft of the kind of questions posed by Socrates in the *Republic*—or the kind of questions raised in the Bible, or in the plays of Shakespeare—modern education treats students chiefly as factors of production, as people to be trained for productive jobs. And although we all wish productive jobs for our children, as parents we know that they are not chiefly job seekers or factors of production. After all, how many of us, if we were given the choice of our children earning a lot of money and being bad, or struggling economically and being good, would choose the former?

My second example of the turn taken by modern education goes to the heart of the problem. Here is a passage from the Teacher’s Guide for Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition, published in 1991 by the College Board—the

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[Latin]: in the first place

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influential organization that, among other things, administers the SAT exam. It is written by an English professor from Agnes Scott College in Georgia.

... AP teachers are implementing the best of the new pedagogies that have influenced leading institutions of higher learning. Perhaps most importantly, as Arthur Applebee explains, “objectivity” and “factuality” have lost their preeminence. *Instruction has become “less a matter of transmittal of an objective and culturally sanctioned body of knowledge,” and more a matter of helping individuals learn to construct their own realities.* This moves English courses away from the concept of subject matter to be memorized and toward “a body of knowledge, skills, and strategies that must be constructed by the learner out of experiences and interactions within the social context of the classroom.” Emphasis is on the processes of language and thought, “processes that are shaped by a given cultural community and which also help students become part of the cultural community.” *Contemporary educators no doubt hope students will shape values and ethical systems as they engage in these interactions, acquiring principles that will help them live in a mad, mad world* (emphases added).

Could the difference be more stark between the older and newer ways of education? Between leading students toward an understanding of the right way to live in a comprehensible world, and telling them they must shape their own values and make their own reality in a world gone mad? And by the way, think of the definition of “reality”; then think of making one’s own reality. Do you see that it destroys the meaning of the word to use it that way?

Two Ways of Governing

The difference between the old and the new way of governing is directly connected to this turn in education. One way to see the difference is to see that laws in America used to be simple and beautiful. They were written with care, and citizens could read them quickly and understand their meaning. Of the four organic laws that founded America—the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the Northwest Ordinance, and the Constitution of the United States—none of them was more than 4,500 words long.

The Northwest Ordinance, adopted in 1787 and passed again in 1789, contains the following beautiful sentence: “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” Accordingly, Congress proceeded to give 1/36 of the land in the vast Northwest Territory—including Michigan and four other states—as an endowment, controlled by the states, to support education in each township. One of the finest laws written subsequently was the Homestead Act of 1862, by which ten percent of U.S. land—over 270 million acres—passed into the hands of individual citizens. The Homestead Act was 1,320 words in length.

Compare the Northwest Ordinance and the Homestead Act—perfect examples of the older, constitutional way of governing—with the new bureaucratic way of imposing central control through rules and processes that no one can understand. Compare them, for instance, to the Affordable Care Act, which when it was passed in 2010—and this does not include the countless rules and regulations it has generated over the past three years—ran to 363,086 words. This law—and in the true sense of the word it wasn’t a law at all, but something different—was not readable or comprehensible

continued on page 6

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to any member of Congress who voted for it or to the citizens whose lives it was aimed at manipulating in a detailed and intrusive way. Could anything be uglier? And is it surprising, being governed in this way, that the richest nation in human history is going broke?

Let me mention two characteristics and dangers of the new way of governing. First, if you look at the size of the federal budget, you see that in economic terms the government is beginning to rival in size the rest of the country. Less and less do we have a large and thriving private sector—which is where the Constitution placed sovereignty—in control of a limited government that owes its authority to the governed.

That the Constitution placed sovereignty in the people, outside the government, means that the only way the people can maintain their sovereignty—the only way they can control the government—is through elections of representatives. But as the government becomes almost as big, in economic terms, as those who elect it, the government itself—with its clients and friends—becomes increasingly influential in the electoral process, while people who make their living independent of the government become less influential. This trend could prove fatal to our country, because at some point if it continues—and we can already see the beginnings with attempts to regulate

political speech—the idea of free elections will become problematic.

My final point is that this new way of governing actively opposes America’s founding principles. Consider an example from the College’s recent history: What could more directly contradict America’s bedrock principle of human equality than the attempt by bureaucrats at the Department of Education to force Hillsdale, whose charter prohibited racial discrimination long before the Civil War, to count its students by the color of their skin?

James Madison is known as the Father of the Constitution, and when he suggested in the *Federalist Papers* that the Constitution receives its authority from the principles of the Declaration of Independence, he was expressing what was then the common view. Here is the famous statement of those principles:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government . . .

Compare that confident statement of principles to this passage from President Obama’s 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope*:

Implicit in [the Constitution’s] structure, in the very idea of ordered liberty, was 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 . . . (emphasis added).

How did Barack Obama come to believe something so foreign to America’s heritage as the idea that in the name of liberty we must reject absolute truths—which necessarily includes rejecting those truths I just quoted from the Declaration? And how is it—because this is a bipartisan problem—that not once in the course of two long presidential campaigns did an opponent of Barack Obama think to point out his unequivocal disagreement with the principles we celebrate as a nation on the Fourth of July?

Do you recall what I said about the connection between the new way of education and the new way of governing? Given what is now taught in our schools, is it any wonder that our leaders today behave like wearers of Gyges’ ring who have not given thought to the questions raised by Socrates in the *Republic*, or to the connection between the principles of the Declaration of Independence and civil and religious liberty?

* * *

The means of repairing both education and government today is the activity that takes place at Hillsdale College. Through its undergraduate and graduate programs, its Kirby Center in Washington, D.C., its extensive online learning program, its charter school initiative, its multiple outreach activities, and its publications such as *Imprimis*, Hillsdale seeks to radiate that activity

to every corner of the nation in every possible way. This is the work needed to save our country, and it is the purpose of Hillsdale’s “Rebirth of Liberty and Learning Campaign.” ■



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DID YOU KNOW?

President Arnn and other members of the Hillsdale faculty appear on the Friday edition of the *Hugh Hewitt Radio Show* to discuss great books, great men, and great ideas. These half-hour segments are archived at hillsdale.edu and are available for free on iTunes.