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Our Responsibility to America



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President, Hillsdale College



The following is adapted from a speech delivered by Dr. Arnn on October 3, 2002, at the Broadmoor Hotel and Resort in Colorado Springs, Colorado, at the 20th anniversary conference of the Shavano Institute for National Leadership.

We meet here to celebrate the 20th anniversary of these Shavano National Leadership conferences. Begun by my predecessor George Roche III in 1982, these conferences have played a powerful part in the recent history of our College. Many of you here know how much fun they can be. You know also that they can be inspiring. They have lasted a long time for a reason.

Part of the cause of their success has to do with the subject matter they cover – the great affairs of the American nation. They have ranged widely across national and world affairs, across tax policy and defense; regulation and business; family and education; schools and churches. The topics seem at first diverse, but in fact they concern a central theme. I want to talk about that theme today.

To see this theme, we have to think a little about our country and the crisis it faces. We have to think about Hillsdale College, and about the relation between the country and the College. That relation has changed during the last 30 years from what it was in the first 30 years of the history of the College. This is not because the College has changed, but because the country has changed. In that change can be found the key to our situation today and what we are to do about it.

The Crisis in America Today

First, let us look at America. Right now it is engaged in a great battle. It is not only the obvious and urgent battle with terrorism, but also a battle over the meaning of the country itself. This battle concerns certain key words that have ever been identified with our nation. Words – ideas and principles – are at the heart of our nation. Over the course of history, our geography has changed massively. Our population has grown manyfold, and as at the beginning it is a nation of immigrants and their children. Yet somehow America has a definite meaning, a meaning in principle that can be measured in practice.

We can see the meaning in the fact that we have a national birthday. Ask yourself, what is the birthday of France? Or China? Or England? One day every summer we celebrate the making of our country. As John Adams predicted, this day is the anniversary of a document that states the purposes of our nation. Abraham Lincoln once spoke of a “central idea” in America, from which all of our “minor thoughts radiate.” The Declaration of Independence called this idea a “self-evident truth.” It is the idea that each of us is equally a child of God, born the same kind of creature, and so equal with respect to our rights.



We have these key terms – rights, equality, liberty. And at certain times in our history we have a pivotal debate about what these terms mean. The political party commanding a majority has changed but a few times in our history, each time after such a debate. At Hillsdale College we like to say that “ideas have consequences.” These are the ideas that have the most profound consequences.

These words do not refer merely to theories, detached from how we live and act and think. These ideas live in our hearts, and grow up with us in our homes and families. Americans are, after all, a distinctive people. They start businesses more often than other people do. They give to charity more often than other people do. They think, or they have thought, that their own families and their own neighborhoods, their own businesses and their communities, are their own things to direct and to nurture. They do not look to others to tell them how to manage their own affairs. They know how to compete with each other and cooperate with each other at the same time, energetically and with good will. They prefer doing things of their own volition and by themselves. They do not like war, but when they are compelled to fight they make good warriors for the same reason that they make good business people or good neighbors, and they can be ruthless. This is the American character.

The New Idea of America

That is the old idea of America. Now there is a new idea. According to it, human nature is not fixed but evolves. Furthermore, this evolution comes to be something that we ourselves control. To believe that man can control his evolution is to believe in effect that we can create ourselves. We can take the place of God. This way of thinking comes to us from German historicism, but in America it became known as progressivism. Early in the last century it began to take over the academic world. Gradually it took over the Democratic Party and got a very powerful influence on the government.

These ideas, too, are not just theories, debated in the ivory tower. Hillary Clinton gave a commencement speech at the University of Texas in April of 1993. The *New York Times Sunday Magazine* reported that because she wrote this speech so soon after the death of her father, she used it to pour out her innermost feelings. The central point of this speech is the need to “redefine who we are as human beings in this post-modern age,” something that requires “remolding society” and “reinventing our institutions.” And of course the engine of all this change is government.

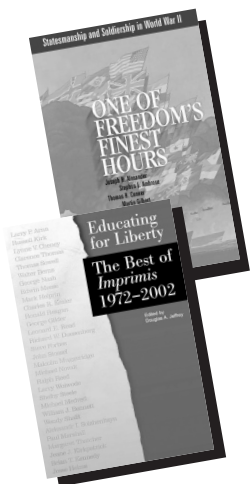
Compare this with the doctrine in the Declaration of Independence that human beings have a certain nature, that they may be governed only in a certain way, and that whatever the location or period of history, any government that does not govern people in that way is wrong.

Just as the old understanding of government implied a certain kind of Constitution and way of life, so the new understanding implies a different kind of Constitution and way of life. Today, the Constitution hardly functions at all as a limit on the actions of the federal government. We citizens expect different things from the government, and tolerate actions by it that would have outraged our fathers. Think, for example, what has become of our property rights. The Founders saw property rights as a sort of summary of all our rights. Where the right to property is protected, entrepreneurship flourishes, and people are able to care for themselves. If it is not protected, then for the same reason freedom of speech and worship and equality of justice will suffer, too.

In 1944, Franklin Roosevelt gave a speech about a “new bill of rights,” founded upon “new self-evident truths.” Notice the use of the language of the Declaration, but now put to a new purpose. One of these new rights is that a farmer should be guaranteed a price for his crops. This is the idea that has produced the mohair subsidy and the annual payments to farming corporations. Roosevelt presents this as an extension of the old rights protected in our Constitution, but in fact it is the abnegation of those rights. It inspires a battle in society over who gets what from the government, or rather, from the taxpayer. The easy path to wealth is to become a member of a protected class. The distortions this breeds in the economy are massive, and they grow steadily. Whereas the old idea of rights – that they can only include things that do not take from another – breeds harmony in society, so the new idea breeds conflict.

The same thing is happening in the political system. Because we have the first purely representative government ever built, we must rely entirely upon elections to control the government. Today elections are managed ever more tightly, and notoriously with a purpose to affect who wins. In the last two months, federal regulators ruled that Jay Leno and David Letterman will not violate election law if they joke about candidates just prior to an election. But of course a government that can rule that this is legal, may soon rule that it is not. Meanwhile, electoral issues move steadily into the courts, where lawyers and judges may decide who can run and who will win. Just recently the New Jersey Supreme Court, the same court that ruled that the Boy Scouts of America may not exclude homosexual scout-

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masters, permitted a party to substitute a popular candidate for an unpopular one, after the statutory time limit had expired. If this continues, elections will become like relay races at a track meet.

I will mention later federal education policy, which now dictates to almost every college in the land about the most minor details. It has developed in just the same way as most of the other interminable intrusions of the federal administrative system into things that were previously private or local.

How does this new understanding affect our national character? Have you noticed that we are not as apt as we used to be to take care of our families for ourselves? Have you noticed that we are not as apt as we used to be to resent subsidy of ourselves by the government? Have you noticed that we are not as apt as we used to be to think that there's a standard of uprightness to which we are to conform? Ride the back roads across America and notice how many buildings have been built to house federal bureaucracies. In the 30 years since *Imprimis* was founded, the U.S. economy has grown in real terms two-and-one-half times, while the federal government has grown eight times.

What do we do about this? The answer can be found in the history of our College.

The Founding of Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College was founded in 1844, 16 years before the Civil War. Its leaders then were Ransom Dunn, Edmund Fairfield and Austin Blair. Like the nation, the College began with a clear statement of

principle, a principle stated in our founding document. It begins with a sentence that echoes the great documents of our nation's founding. It expresses gratitude to "God for the prevalence in the land of the inestimable blessings of civil and religious freedom and intelligent piety." In order to preserve these blessings, "sound learning" is necessary. That, say our founders, is why they established Hillsdale College. If you learn, you can have these blessings. If you are ignorant, you cannot.

One of our founders, Ransom Dunn, probably the greatest man ever to work at our College, was a member of our faculty for 50 years. One of his sons died in the Civil War in the arms of another. At one point, because we needed money, Dunn got on a horse, rode out and raised it, five dollars at a time, from farmers and merchants across the Midwest. He was gone for two years and came back with \$10,000, a huge sum. This was a great act of faith on his part, and on the part of those who gave money. They believed that by supporting liberal education, they were making America fit to be free.

Pursuing this end, Hillsdale College quickly became one of the most influential small colleges in the land. October 2004 will mark the 150th anniversary of the first Republican Convention. Abraham Lincoln was a friend of many people who worked at our College at that time, and the chairman of the first Republican Convention was Austin Blair, a member of our faculty. Frederick Douglass spoke on our campus, as did Edward Everett, the man who preceded Lincoln at Gettysburg. And more of our boys fought for the Union in the Civil War than any non-military college that we can find. Ideas, the ideas that one learns through liberal education, had consequences. Although the



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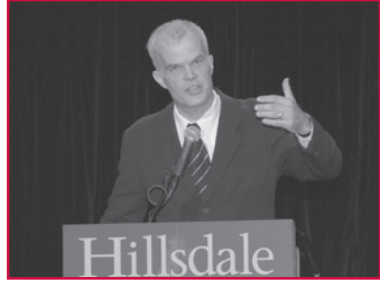
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“If you want young people to take notions like right and wrong seriously, there is an indispensable condition: they must be in the presence of adults who take right and wrong seriously.”

William J. Bennett
Author, *The Book of Virtues*



“When John Adams was a diplomat in Paris he couldn't send his eldest son to school with any regularity, but they read Plutarch to each other over the breakfast table. This shows you how the Founders tried to instill classical learning in their children, as a way to prepare them for public life.”

Richard Brookhiser
Author, *Founding Father*



“A Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, once wrote, ‘Our acts follow our thoughts as the wheel of the cart follows the hook of the ox.’ That’s a great line. Our thoughts and our principles constitute our culture.”

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick
Former U.S. Representative to the United Nations
(pictured with Board of Trustees Vice Chairman Bill Brodbeck, '66)



“The average child between the ages of five and 18 spends 900 hours a year in classrooms and 1400 hours a year watching television. If you want to look at what’s changed in America since the ‘good old days,’ look at that.”

Michael Medved
Author and Radio Talk Show Host
(pictured with *Imprimis* editor Doug Jeffrey)

Shavano Institute

Hillsdale College

Educating for Liberty Since 1844



Board of Trustees Chairman Donald R. Mossey, '51, poses with a statue of George Washington that was awarded to him for his many years of service to Hillsdale College.



Hillsdale Academy Headmaster Ken Calvert (right) presents the Henry Salvatori Prize for Excellence in Teaching to Micah Porter, '95, as Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn looks on.



Hillsdale College senior and Student Ambassador Juliet Manto and United States Air Force Academy Cadet Staff Sergeant Joshua Bibb dance to the sounds of the Hot Tomatoes Dance Orchestra.



Lee Witte, pictured with her husband, Cliff Witte, signs limited-edition lithographs of her western-themed collage paintings, the profits from which go to Hillsdale College scholarships.

20th Anniversary **SHAVANO** INSTITUTE

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College was small, its consequences spread across an entire nation.

Hillsdale had a devotion to the nation that was open and emphatic. The campus as it now exists was dedicated on the Fourth of July in 1853. The speech by Edmund Fairfield appealed to the good of America, to freedom, to service to God, and to the necessity of education to all of them.

The Last 30 Years

Consider now the modern history of Hillsdale College. In our first 30 years, we were fighting to save the Union. For the last 30 years, we have been fighting to keep the federal government out of our business. This fight actually started in the late 1950s, when the federal government decided to subsidize education. The leaders of Hillsdale believed that this federal subsidy was not constitutional. They also thought that it would distort liberal arts education. And so our College refused all that money. J. Donald Phillips was president then, and in 1966 he issued the Hillsdale College Declaration of Independence, a noble document that makes excellent reading still today.

In 1971, George Roche became president, and in 1975 the College got a letter from the U.S. Department of Education. It said that some of our kids were getting student aid — such as the G.I. Bill — from the federal government. It said that for Hillsdale to accept students, it had to become a signatory to Title IV of the Higher Education Act. When I first came to the College, I ordered up a copy of Title IV. I started reading it, and after a few pages I decided that I am either not intelligent enough, or (I hope) too intelligent, to read it. So I ordered the kit that one uses to sign up for Title IV, and the kit was very understandable. To become a signatory, several people in the College would have to sign statements of personal liability to comply with Title IV, which is now almost 500 pages long. This would mean that the administration would have to do what federal regulators tell us, rather than what our board of trustees or our mission statement tells us.

Title IV says, among other things, that colleges must count their students and staff by the color of their skin. And as I mentioned, we had boys fight and die in the Civil War in opposition to just that. I told somebody in the Michigan Department of Education one time, “You came down here with a clipboard and walked around campus counting people by their color. This is an embarrassing thing to do, and you know it. I want you to know that we have spilled blood on the ground over that principle. We will not be made to violate it.”

The first thing that President Roche and the board of trustees did when they received this ultimatum from the federal government was to sue. In 1984, the U.S. Supreme Court decided against Hillsdale nine to nothing. Along with Chairman Don Mossey and the board, President Roche decided to give up the federal student aid money. George Roche was, for 28 years as president, a brave and a firm man in commitment to Hillsdale’s principles. When he embarked on the effort to keep the College independent of federal control, neither he nor the board had any way to be sure they could find the money. Just like the founders of the College, they acted in faith that they were right and that a way would be found. It was a shining moment. Neither that moment nor the people who made it possible will be forgotten so long as our College stands.

Of course those, who have fought this battle for Hillsdale College have won splendid results so far. The money we need to make up for the federal aid has increased by a factor of 15 since those first days. But we have been able to find it. We have been holding these conferences for 20 years, and they continue to be well attended by people like yourselves, people who love their country and wish to join together to put it right. We have been publishing *Imprimis* for 30 years. It has grown in circulation from 1,500 to more than 1,100,000; it has more than 150,000 additional readers since I came to the College. Just as in its early days, little Hillsdale College is a beacon to the nation.

Hillsdale was a patriotic college in 1980, just as it was in 1850. It holds to the same principles today, but now it is in conflict with the very thing it had fought before to preserve. This carries a lesson for every American.

What Are We to Do?

In the beginning, certain ideas were powerful in shaping our nation and forming its character. At key moments in our history, these ideas have been controversial. Their meaning has been debated and the future has been shaped by the course of these debates. Today the meaning of these terms has been claimed for a new cause, a cause contradictory to their first meaning.

Education has always been important in these debates. In a nation of ideas, it matters decisively what is thought, especially by those who teach the young, especially those among the young who are likely to become leaders. For instance, if young people go to college with the understanding that they have a right to go, and therefore that someone else is obliged to pay for it, they learn a lesson about the meaning of rights. If they go to a college where their scholarships and loans are provided by private



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citizens, who give their money voluntarily, and if they are asked to write thank you letters to those benefactors, they learn something else.

We have big government today, because of a vain attempt to replace the authority of the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” with the authority of lawmakers – no, with the authority of regulators. We will turn back from that attempt, or we will lose the ability to exercise our rights and control our government.

Woodrow Wilson, a leading figure in progressivism, called our Declaration of Independence “obsolete.” But he, like Franklin Roosevelt and more recently the Clintons, understood the power of its terms. They used those terms for new purposes. They altered their meaning, and by that means, over two generations, revolutionized the constitutional system.

It is an important fact that the debate they began has not yet been completed. Though the aims of the progressive movement have been far advanced, they have not been fully won. Their advocates have fought a long battle with the conservative forces in the land, among whom Hillsdale College has been proudly ranked for over 30 years. Thus the American people still live for the most part in love of liberty, in vigorous enterprise, in respect for God, in devotion to the common-sense under-

standing of right and wrong. Osama bin Laden is the latest in a line of tyrants to believe that our soul has been corrupted and when attacked we will run away. Like those before him, he has learned that we are a people in whom courage, and all the other virtues too, still thrive.

If then we are not to despair, we should learn the lessons of the past. To keep our freedom, we must study with renewed diligence the principles that make it right. We should learn again to use the tools bequeathed to us. We should talk and act like Americans, loving our country, respecting that Providence upon whom our Fathers called, and keeping faith in the Right, as God gives us to see it.

The history of Hillsdale College is in fact nothing other or less than the telling, on a smaller scale, of the history of our nation. Because we have held fast to the faith of our original creed, we have been in conflict now for a long time with the government that we have also fought bravely, at every time of need, to preserve. We are not given other tools than study and learning, prayer and devotion, argument and action, with which to defend our liberty. If a little College can stand for that through war and trial, anyone can do it.

There is the hope. There is the method. We at Hillsdale College will abandon neither.

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