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The Crisis and Politics of Higher Education

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The following is adapted from a longer article, “The GOP and Higher Education,” published in the Fall 2006 issue of the Claremont Review of Books.

Many of our politicians have it backwards these days. It’s not a shame to lose an election. But it is a shame to serve a wrong idea—which is what Republicans, while in control of the White House and both houses of Congress, have been doing the past six years in education policy. Most recently, they have been seeking to reauthorize the Higher Education Act of 1965, the first and still the authoritative assertion of the modern bureaucratic state into higher learning.

A product of the Great Society, the Act provides direct aid from the federal government to colleges and universities and their students. With this aid comes rules, rules by the tens or hundreds of thousands, rules beyond the knowing of any person. Every year these rules are adjusted, refined, forgotten, remembered, and reinterpreted in countless ways by countless people. But every five or six years, relatively major changes are made by several pieces of legislation. This is what is meant by “reauthorization.”

Conservatives, when they argue for school choice (a good cause), like to say that elementary and secondary schools should be financed on the same principles as colleges, where student aid follows the student to whichever school he pleases. This is true enough, but it is not the aid alone that follows the student. Title IV of the current Higher Education Act regulates colleges that accept federal student financial aid (something Hillsdale College, honorably and famously, does not do). Title IV includes now more than 300 pages of regulations, and the failure of a senior college official to comply in a material respect can lead to heavy fines and imprisonment. Of course these regulations grow in number and



scope every year. Of course they affect profoundly the management deliberations of any college that is subject to their commands—which is to say, practically every college. The Higher Education Act is the very model of bureaucratic legislation: top down, complex, requiring interpretation of endless details by everyone concerned, and placing power over local things in remote beings whose very job titles are indecipherable, and who, also, have almost no direct contact with the actual things being accomplished.

Federal aid to higher education is politically potent. This is true because people who work in colleges are powerful. It is true also because the public, for a good reason and a bad one, believes in higher education and thinks it worthy of public support. Education is rightly seen as the road up, the avenue of progress for all. Popular government, moreover, requires that a capacity for governing be widely spread, that education at all levels should impart the knowledge and civility requisite to good citizenship. Without these qualities, the people who make the laws will not act justly or respect liberty, and the people who live under the laws will not know what to do about that. The preservation of the republic depends, therefore, upon a proper system of education. At its highest, education is the contemplation of the ultimate ends in virtue of which means are selected for the sake of private and public happiness. The American people's recognition of education's importance creates favor for a Higher Education Act presumed to serve those ends.

Rising Costs, Declining Skills: Is Federal Aid Effective?

In addition to this old and noble reason for support of the Act, there is in modern times the acute problem of the expense of college. Since the passing of the Higher Education Act, college expenses have exploded, especially in recent years. Every constituency except the richest fears the cost of college in the same way that people fear catastrophic setbacks to their health. Government help for the cost of education is very welcome to those who have children approaching college age. These people are often unaware of the impact that federal regulation and subsidy of education have upon its cost. Anyway, they want help right now.

Thus most Republicans since Reagan have

set their shoulders to extending and enlarging federal education policy, consistently making the situation worse. First and foremost, they have spent a lot of money. Consider: Since September 11, 2001, defense spending has risen 47 percent, while higher education spending has risen 133 percent. There are major increases in most higher education programs, especially those regarding need-based aid. Both the amounts available, and the upward limits of the income groups to whom they are available, have risen sharply. This cascade of funds exceeds all prior experience in rates of growth, except for the first heady days of the Act.

More recently the Republicans seem to have become aware that this additional spending is not quite getting the job done. For one thing, they cannot seem to spend money as fast as colleges can raise tuition. The people they mean to help are not better off, but the colleges are.

In the Executive Branch, a recent Draft Report released by the National Commission on the Future of Education—a commission formed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings—offers lots of ideas to cut costs. But the one federal policy that would work is not discussed at all, despite the fact that the Bush administration, in another department, has done some of its best work in pursuing it. In health care, health savings accounts (HSAs) and high-deductible policies are making patients more important in the health care system. These patients are spending their own money, and in a miraculous development, they are more careful with it than they are with the money of others. Instead of learning this lesson, the National Commission is promising more subsidies to colleges and threatening regulation if they do not watch their costs.

The second great concern animating federal education policy is the miserable failures in basic skills, especially math and science but also literacy, of America's high school and college graduates. The National Commission's Draft Report offers an impressive number of ideas for dealing with this crisis. But they are all built on the same notion: that once upon a time, in the 1950s, the Soviet Union fired a rocket into space before the U.S. did, and so the federal government began funding higher education, and because of that we had a great coordinated national effort and became the leaders in science and technology. Secretary Spellings tells this story often. It is the same story that was told back at the time of Sputnik, and it was used effectively to justify passage of the original Higher Education Act.

This story is nice, but it cannot be true. Sputnik went up in 1957, after Americans had

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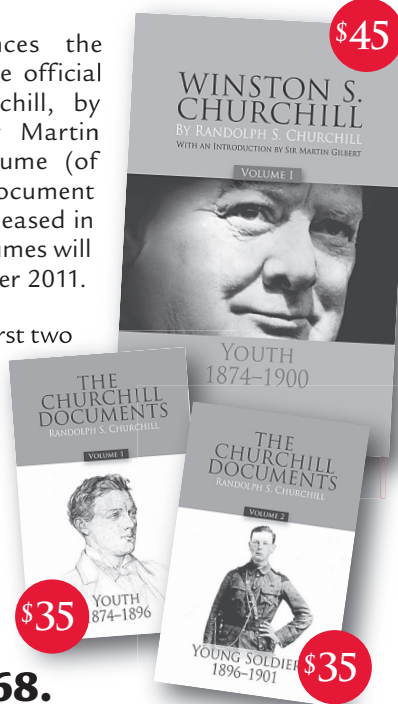
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invented the telephone, the laser, the transistor, done half the work to discover DNA, settled a continent, covered it with railways, roads, airports, and communications. We managed to do all of this without the Department of Education. Federal aid to higher education started in small ways a year after Sputnik. We landed on the moon in 1969, twelve years later, barely time to get an undergraduate degree and then a Ph.D. No student funded even in the first year can have played an important part in the moon landing. It is not possible that federal aid to education had a decisive impact on the space race. Nor is it possible that our race with the central planners in Moscow was won by duplicating their methods. The genius of the American people lies elsewhere.

Academic Content: Search for Truth or Relativism?

Republican policymakers have strayed even further afield in addressing the content of higher

education. A bill recently passed by the House of Representatives contains a statement on “student speech and association rights.” The “Bill Summary” released by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce says that this section is modeled on the Academic Bill of Rights, an idea proposed by David Horowitz. Horowitz, a lion on the campus and an effective guerrilla fighter in good causes, has reason to make his recommendations. He knows firsthand, by visiting dozens of college campuses where he is a popular speaker, how skewed are the opinions that reign there among the faculty. His idea of an Academic Bill of Rights is to turn to advantage the notion of balance and value-free neutrality to which those campuses pay lip service. Here is how he describes it:

All higher education institutions in this country embrace principles of academic freedom that were first laid down in 1915 in the famous *General Report* of the American Association of University Professors The *Report* admonishes faculty to avoid “taking unfair advantage of the student’s immaturity by indoctrinat-

ing him with the teacher's own opinions before the student has had an opportunity to fairly examine other opinions upon the matters in question" In other words, an education—as distinct from an indoctrination—makes students aware of a spectrum of scholarly views on matters of controversy and opinion, and does not make particular answers to such controversial matters the goal of the instruction.

In another place, Horowitz writes:

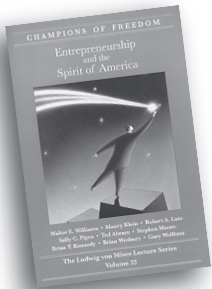
There are no "correct" answers to controversial issues, which is why they are controversial: scholars cannot agree. Answers to such questions are inherently subjective and opinion-based and teachers should not use their authority in the classroom to force students to adopt their positions. To do so is not education but indoctrination.

There are truths here, which give the statement plausibility. Certainly students should not be browbeaten by their professors, and anyway good students are not persuaded by this tactic. One ought not to draw conclusions without examining

all the serious arguments on every side. Evidence must be eagerly sought and neither suppressed nor distorted. These concepts are part of the substance of the academic life. And they are old.

Indeed, if the principles of academic freedom are real, they cannot have been laid down first in 1915. The very adjective "academic" is taken from Plato's ancient teaching ground. The first universities were operating, in the later 12th century, more or less as we know them today. A couple of centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson worked with fellow revolutionary James Madison to design a college curriculum. These men committed treason rather than submit to a violation of freedom of speech and conscience. Yet Madison wrote to Jefferson that it "is certainly very material that the true doctrines of Liberty, as exemplified in our political system, should be *inculcated on* those who are to sustain and may administer it" (emphasis added). Then, he commits a heresy by speaking of heresy:

After all, the most effectual safeguard against heretical intrusions into the school of politics, will be an able & orthodox professor, whose course of instruction will be an example to his successors, and may carry with it a sanction from the visitors.



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Did Madison really mention “a sanction from the visitors,” meaning the governing board of the college? What can he have been thinking? But before we condemn him as a bigot, we should remember his resume. He cannot have meant that he wished to raise up generations of automatons, men who might, for example, do the bidding of a King or aristocrat merely because they were in awe of authority. That would be the kind of man Jefferson and Madison had lately expelled from the new nation by force. The co-author of the *Federalist*, the constitution writer whose preparation for that work was an academic study both exhaustive and profound, cannot have meant that education should be one-sided, partial, partisan, or shallow.

Jefferson, for his part, is famous for writing that there are such things as “laws of nature and of nature’s God”—truths that are accessible to reason, and better known if the reason is trained to see them. Jefferson, like Madison, thought that an educated man would have investigated these matters—indeed, that he would have come to some conclusions about them that would decisively shape his life. Students, when they are young, must have a reason to begin the journey of learning, or they will not begin it at all. If they start out indoctrinated with the facile notion that “there are no correct answers,” they will be relieved of the burden of looking for them. They will be launched on a journey that can only lead nowhere.

Madison and Jefferson are not alone here. College after college has been founded with such words as *virtue*, *honor*, *piety*, *freedom*, *right*, and *goodness* in their mottos and their missions. These are words of value, and they are controversial words. That means in the academic setting they must be debated and discussed. At the same time it must be realized that whole institutions, many of them lasting centuries, have been built to teach or “indoctrinate” students with the principles that underlie moral and intellectual virtue.

Are the purposes of those institutions rendered obsolete by the principles of academic freedom that were “first laid down” by the American Association of University Professors in 1915? That was certainly the intent of that association. Its relativist principles have remade the university into the thing we have today. Colleges have not thereby gained but lost in openness, profundity, civility, and high purpose. The universities built on these new principles are a scandal of uniformity, of contempt for the

unorthodox, of disdain for the backward folk who take the foundations of their colleges or their country seriously.

The relativism and utilitarianism of the progressives who laid down these principles is nothing but an invitation to the assertion of the will. It begins by undercutting the whole point of college, which is—choosing a traditional college mission statement at random—to provide “such moral, social and artistic instruction and culture as will best develop the minds and improve the hearts of the students.” (I borrow from the Hillsdale College Articles of Association, 1855.) In the older view, students should be invited to look, not to themselves and their own opinions, but rather outwards and upwards, beyond themselves to something against which they can judge the choices they must make. Shakespeare is beautiful and instructive, but not usually at first. He takes work. What justifies the work is the idea that some great thing awaits the one who does it successfully. Any recovery of excellence in education will entail a recovery of this older idea of the purpose of education.

National Standards and the Danger of Political Correctness

Turning back to the National Commission’s Draft Report, we see clearly again how little the contemporary crisis of education is understood today even by conservative policymakers. The Draft Report promotes enforcement through a method that goes beyond anything ever imagined by the original Higher Education Act—national standards. Compliance with these standards would be examined through a test administered to every student in the land. The results would be published so that everyone may see. Accrediting agencies, which will be nationalized or anyway more tightly regulated, would use this “outcomes data” to accredit or withhold accreditation.

All the vices of “teaching to the test” are latent in these proposals. Charles Murray writes of the No Child Left Behind Act that it has not improved test scores and that it creates an atmosphere of endless drilling, which is poor for learning. And he is probably right. But even worse than the tests’ ineffectiveness and waste of time is that they will be expressions of the worst forms of political correctness. One should fear this, first of all, because the National Commission is not interested in that

subject. It justifies its reforms on the ground that math and science knowledge and literacy are poor, and college costs too much. This is true, but not exhaustive. Certain matters formerly thought important do not come up in the Draft Report nor, apparently, in the deliberations of the National Commission. The Draft Report does not mention religion, God, or morality. It does not mention history as a subject of study. It does not mention the Constitution, either for what it commands or allows, or as a subject of study. Although busy governing, the Report does not mention government as a subject of study. Philosophy, literature, happiness, goodness, beauty are not to be seen, even though these terms abound in the mission statements and mottos of American colleges whenever they are older than a hundred years and in most of the younger ones.

The Draft Report is devoid of any echo of the purpose of education as it is trumpeted in our first national documents. It contains no whisper of the sentiments from the Northwest Ordinance, those regarding “religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind.” It does not so much as murmur the hallowed idea that students should learn the lessons upon which America was built, the conveying of which lessons is the reason government would be interested in education in the first place. Have they read no Lincoln? For example, his prescription for public schools:

that every man may receive at least, a moderate education, and thereby [be] enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions

These tests that will decide the fate of colleges will be devised later. One does not have to guess about their nature; they will be prepared by the most influential academics. Or one can observe the tests they write now. Take, for example, the College Board’s Advanced Placement Program, and specifically its *Teacher Guide, AP English Literature and Composition*.

Nothing seems simple anymore, particularly where the introductory courses are concerned. There is little consensus among English teachers when it comes to goals, curriculum, approaches to literature, or even definitions of literature, or rather literatures

There is no agreement, then, about the meaning of the thing that is being taught. Formerly, there was a more “robust regard for textual authority.” Now,

perhaps most importantly. . . “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

And finally:

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.

Forget for a moment the selfishness, lassitude and despair that are latent in this notion. The student is taught that the world is mad: find your own way. If the text does not appeal to you, never mind. You are only looking for your own reality: Find what comfort you may in it. Little wonder that half the opinions of the Supreme Court today read as if the Constitution were unavailable to them. Little wonder that members of Congress write about education requirements *ad nauseam*, ignorant all the while of the great documents by which education was built in our country.

These will be the tests. College students will take them, and colleges who do not prepare their students to excel on them will be held up to ridicule and maybe denied accreditation. Poor parents, whose children will be taught to devalue all that has bound their family together. Poor students, if they want to waste their time in the love of Milton or Aquinas or Plato.

What is to Be Done?

To repair all this and place the education system on a better footing, there are two things that need doing, neither of them proposed so far during this reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. The first is that we should return control of college to private people to the utmost extent possible. The federal government should do what Reagan suggested: go back to the things it has the constitutional power to do. As it withdraws, it should mimic the great acts of education



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support from our past, the Northwest Ordinance and its companion, the Land Ordinance of 1785, and the Morrill Act signed by Lincoln. It should decentralize authority to the states. Or even go one better: Let taxpayers keep their money, if they are prepared to spend it for something so vital to the public interest as education.

The second thing is to recover the tradition of liberal and civic education that has helped to keep us free by teaching us the purpose of our freedom. To do this, we will have to be willing to take positions on subjects that are “controversial.” We will have to organize our colleges to study the great documents of the American past and those upon which that past was built. This will involve us—gasp—in the study of the Western canon. This is not merely a good thing; it is “urgent.” The National Commission goes on at length about what is “urgent,” but it forgets a point evident in this little paragraph from an influential man of our day:

You are the nation who, rather than ruling by the Shariah of Allah in its Constitution and Laws, choose to invent your own laws

as you will and desire. You separate religion from your policies, contradicting the pure nature which affirms Absolute Authority to the Lord and your Creator.

This is from a statement broadcast to the American people by Osama bin Laden on November 24, 2002. He objects specifically to the thing that makes us what we are, the principles of civil and religious freedom. This man and his friends have killed more than 5,000 of us already. They seek weapons to kill us en masse. They offer us peace only if we agree that the right to make a law comes from appointment to the priesthood. Here is a truly urgent matter. We are in a war, likely to be a great and terrible war, a war for the central principles of our land. Perhaps we ought to study those principles. Then maybe we can remember the meaning of the doctrine that “resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.”



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