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“All Honor to Jefferson”

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The following address was delivered at Hillsdale College on April 16, 2009, at the dedication of a statue of Thomas Jefferson by Hillsdale College Associate Professor of Art Anthony Frudakis.

It is one of the wonders of the modern political world that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Unaware that the “Sage of Monticello” had died earlier in the day, the crusty Adams, as he felt his own life slipping away, uttered his last words, “Thomas Jefferson still lives.” And so he does.

Today, as we dedicate this marvelous statue of our third President, and place him in the company of George Washington, Winston Churchill, and Margaret Thatcher on Hillsdale’s Liberty Walk, soon to be joined by Abraham Lincoln, it is fitting to reflect on what of Thomas Jefferson still lives. What is it that we honor him for here today?

Without question, pride of place must go to Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. That document established Jefferson as one of America’s great political poets, second only to Abraham Lincoln. And fittingly, it was Lincoln himself who recognized the signal importance of its first two paragraphs when he wrote: “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all

men and all times,” where it continues to stand as “a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”

That abstract truth, of course, was 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.” It is surely a sign of our times that so many Americans no longer know what these words mean, or what their signal importance has been to peoples around the world. The one thing they are certain of, however, is that Jefferson was a hypocrite. How could he assert that all men were created equal and yet own slaves? What these critics fail to notice is that this is precisely what makes Jefferson’s statement so remarkable. Under no necessity for doing so, he penned the immortal words that would ultimately be invoked to put the institution of slavery on the road to extinction. His own draft of the Declaration was even stronger. In it, he made it clear that blacks were human and that slavery was a moral abomination and a blot upon the honor of his country.

Jefferson was serving as Minister in Paris while the Constitution was being drafted, and played no direct part in framing it. But he did make known his objections, the most important being the omission of a Bill of Rights. After the Constitution

was ratified, he returned to the United States to serve as Secretary of State in the Washington administration. In and out of government in the 1790s, he challenged Hamilton’s expansive views of federal power, warning against a mounting federal debt, a growing patronage machine, and what he considered dangerous monarchical pretensions.

In the tumultuous contest for the presidency in 1800, Jefferson presided over the first peaceful transition of power in modern history, assuring those he had defeated that they too had rights that the majority was bound to respect. His observation, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists,” established a standard toward which every incoming administration continues to strive.

As president of the United States, Jefferson sought to rally the country around the principles of limited government. His First Inaugural Address reminded his fellow citizens that their happiness and prosperity rested upon a “wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.” This, he thought, was “the sum of good government” and all that was “necessary to close the circle of our felicities.” Although Jefferson had omitted property from the inalienable rights enumerated in the Declaration, he strongly defended private property because it encouraged industry and liberality—and,

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

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This over-life-sized bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson by Hillsdale College Associate Professor of Art Anthony Frudakis was dedicated on April 16, 2009, and stands near Central Hall on the Hillsdale campus.

most importantly, because he thought it just that each individual enjoy the equal right to the fruits of his labor.

From these political principles, Jefferson never wavered. Writing in 1816, he once again insisted that the tasks of a liberal republic were few: government should restrain individuals from encroaching on the equal rights of others, compel them to contribute to the necessities of society, and require them to submit their disputes to an impartial judge. “When the laws have declared and enforced all this, they have fulfilled their functions.”

At the same time, Jefferson believed that constitutions must keep pace with the times. If the people wished to alter their frame of government, say, to fund public improvements or education, they were free to do so. But they should do so by constitutional amendment and not by allowing their representatives to construe the powers of government broadly. He particularly objected to the Court’s sitting in judgment on the powers of the legislative and executive branches, or acting as an umpire between the states and the federal government. To cede to

the judiciary this authority, he believed, would render the Constitution a “ball of wax” in the hands of federal judges. In his battles with Chief Justice John Marshall, he defended the principle of coordinate construction, as Lincoln (and almost every strong president since then) did after him, arguing that each branch of government must determine for itself the constitutionality of its acts.

After his retirement from politics, Jefferson returned to Monticello, where he continued to think about the meaning and requirements of republican government. Republicanism, he was convinced, was more than just a set of institutional arrangements; at bottom, it depended upon the character of the people. To keep alive this civic spirit, he championed public education for both boys and girls, with the most talented boys going on at public expense all the way through college. He envisioned the University of Virginia, to which he devoted the last years of his life, as a temple that would keep alive the “vestal flame” of republicanism and train men for public service. And here, I cannot

help but notice how the recent renovations and additions to the Hillsdale campus seem to take their inspiration from Mr. Jefferson's university, paying graceful homage to an architecture of democracy that inspires and ennobles.

As Jefferson understood it, education had a distinctly political mission, beginning at the elementary level: schools were to form citizens who understood their rights and duties, who knew how earlier free societies had risen to greatness, and by what errors and vices they had declined. *Knowing* was not enough, however. Jefferson also believed that citizens must have the opportunity to *act*. Anticipating Tocqueville, Jefferson admired the strength of the New England townships and sought to adapt them to Virginia. The wards, as he called them, would allow citizens to have a say on those matters most interesting to them, such as the education of their children and the protection of their property. If ever they became too dispirited to

care about these things, republican government could not survive.

The wards were certainly not the greatest of Jefferson's contributions to the natural rights republic—that honor must be awarded to the Declaration—but they were his most original. Instead of consolidating power or attempting to forge a general will, Jefferson went in the opposite direction, “dividing and subdividing” political power, while multiplying the number of interests and views that could be heard. He saw these units of local self-government as a way of bringing the large republic within the reach of citizens and so keeping alive the spirit of republicanism so vital to its preservation. And in this day and age, when the federal government seems to intrude on every aspect of our daily lives, and people feel powerless over matters of most interest to them, can we doubt that he was right? For this insight, too, let us echo Lincoln: “All honor to Jefferson”! ■

Hero, Standing

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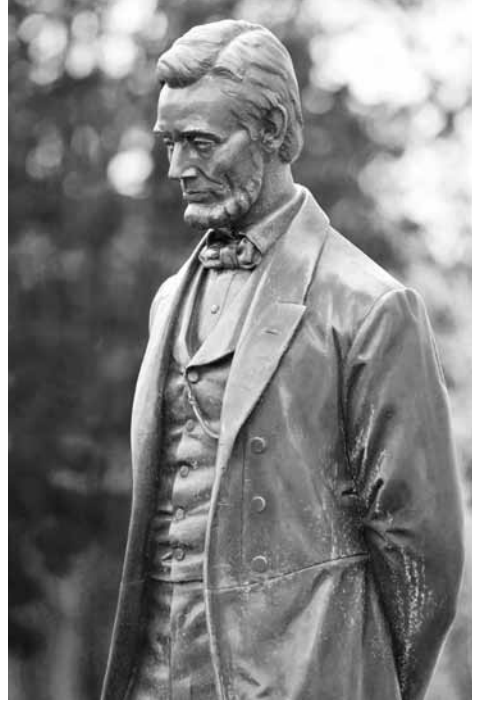
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The following are excerpts from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on May 8, 2009, at the dedication of a statue of Abraham Lincoln by Hillsdale College Associate Professor of Art Anthony Frudakis.

Heroes have become invisible. Their virtues have become unexplainable in the language we now use to explain human actions . . . Great deeds somehow keep on being done, but we have lost a capacity to see them as great. Biographies grow to ever-greater and greater lengths, while the subjects of them shrink into the shadows of the pedestrian, the

ordinary, and the relentlessly disclosed secret. And no history textbook can today pass muster unless it highlights the insignificant, reduces absolutes to local accident, and eliminates grand narratives in favor of a collection of tales, full of sound and fury, whose chief goal is to elicit pity, sympathy or guilt.

The hero is the story, not just of a



This over-life-sized bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln by Hillsdale College Associate Professor of Art Anthony Frudakis was dedicated on May 8, 2009, and stands near Kendall Hall on the Hillsdale campus.

good deed, but a great deed—a great deed which climbs the unclimbable, endures the unendurable, holds fast to the lost. But who can be a hero when climbing is so routine that Mt. Everest has become littered with discarded bottles and cans? The dark side of our bottomless wealth and comfort is a cynicism which disarms any motivation for sacrifice, and a suspicion that, in a world of comforts, heroes can only be play-actors. Something other than the heroic must be motivating the heroes, we seem to reason, because there is so little need for heroism....

* * *

What we do here today, in dedicating Tony Frudakis's statue of Abraham Lincoln, flies so finely in the face of this age of post-heroism that somewhere, we can be sure some voice will fix on this event to tell us that this is all farce—that Lincoln cannot be a hero because he was a racist, or that he cannot be the savior of the Union because the Union was rotten to its exploitative, capitalist, war-mongering, imperialist, Christ-loving,

minority-massacring, little-Eichmann core and couldn't deserve a savior.

For six decades after his death, this was not so. Lincoln was the quintessential, the indispensable, American hero. Of the 600 or so statues dedicated to American presidents, fully one third are of Abraham Lincoln; one of them, Daniel Chester French's seated Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, may be the most famous American statue ever created. But the post-World War One cultural malaise, which inaugurated an era of literary debunking and political minimalism, curved the arc of other Lincoln statuary downwards, away from the wise, heroic statesman and in the direction of a more folksy, proletarian Lincoln. Even in Lincoln's Illinois, statuary of Lincoln continues to bring him off pedestals, closer to the earth, sitting on park benches, in the fashion of Jeff Garland's 2001 *Just Don't Sit There, Do Something*, a park-bench Lincoln whose head was decapitated in 2007 as a wedding prank...Rick Harney's 2006 *Lincoln at Leisure*, which captures a shirt-sleeved Lincoln leaning on a fence...

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and, in Springfield, John W. McClarey's *A Greater Task*, which is supposed to depict Lincoln grasping his coat around him as he delivers his farewell speech in 1861, but which ends up making him look like a derelict panhandling for spare quarters.

The statues, however, only reflect a larger decline in our estimate of Lincoln. In a multicultural perspective, no triumphal, Union-saving Lincoln is allowed to emerge; multiculturalism is the celebration of ordinariness, information, and egalitarianism. Which is why most people today are interested in knowing whether Lincoln was gay rather than knowing whether he was right....

The price we pay for this, in our schools and in our public discourse as well as in our statuary, is a steep one. Political systems, whether constitutional regimes or political parties, rest on a bedrock of culture—of certain shared assumptions, rituals, and unexamined attitudes—which can sometimes seem to have the stolid immovability of granite, and which at others can seem to have the fragility of snow crusts. The difference is made by confidence, which itself is composed in equal parts of practical results and constant reminders. So a constitutional regime appears to be a collection of laws and statutes; but those laws and statutes depend first on a reverence for words, for reason, and for orderliness. And that reverence must grow both from the confidence that words, reasons, order, laws and statutes really do protect and assist them, and from the constant dinning into the ears of its citizens that same confidence. On the other hand, in a culture

of repudiation, where venality, corruption and incompetence produce chaos or violence, and knowledge is reduced to a species of power, confidence in words evaporates, and so do constitutions; but when examples of civic good are corroded and dissolved by victimhood and grievance, confidence evaporates just as quickly. And all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put it back together again, because there are no more kings among men....

So what is there of the hero in the statue we dedicate here today? If we mean by 'hero' merely a sword-swinging swashbuckler on a spree, we will find little of that here (and in fact, it's noticeable that in genuinely heroic statues of real soldiers, like the St. Gaudens of William Sherman in Central Park or the Henry Merwin Shrady statue of Ulysses Grant at the U.S. Capitol, no swords are ever swung). But this is because heroism is not about skull-cracking. It is, first of all, about profound moral conviction. The face of this Lincoln is set, not in excitement or antagonism, but in conviction. "I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me," he wrote to Secretary of State William Seward in the summer of 1862, when things appeared bleak for the cause of the Union. Especially, Lincoln was single-minded in his commitment to emancipation. "While I remain in my present position," Lincoln said in 1863, "I shall not attempt to retract or modify the emancipation proclamation; nor shall I return to slavery any person who is free by the terms of that proclamation." And if, he added a year later, "the people should, by whatever mode or means, make it an Executive duty to re-enslave such persons, another, and not I, must be their instrument to perform it." As he himself said, "I am a slow walker, but I never walk back."

But heroism cannot be only a matter

of conviction, since conviction and mere stubbornness are easy to confuse. The hero must also be the possessor of ability, and be conscious of that ability without any self-flattering hubris. People routinely underestimated Lincoln. After his election, one indignant newspaper editor demanded, “Who will write this ignorant man’s state papers?” That editor needn’t have worried. “Any man who took Lincoln for a simpleminded man,” said his old friend and legal associate, Leonard Swett, “would very soon wake [up] with his back in a ditch.” Swett especially remembered the deceptive shrewdness with which Lincoln conducted matters: “He kept a kind of account book of how things were progressing for three, or four months, and whenever I would get nervous and think things were going wrong, he would get out his estimates and show how everything on the great scale of action—the resolutions of Legislatures, the instructions of delegates, and things of that character—was going exactly as he expected.” No wonder that two years into the Civil War, Lincoln’s secretary, John Hay, could marvel that “the old man sits here and wields like a backwoods Jupiter the bolts of war and the machinery of government with a hand equally steady and equally firm. . . . There is no man in the country, so wise, so gentle and so firm. I believe the hand of God placed him where he is.”

Still, conviction and ability can often wilt in the face of antagonism, and Lincoln suffered enough antagonism to make the word fail on the lips. This statue shows a Lincoln of conviction and ability, but also of perseverance. Not angry defiance—for that, the hands would not be clasped behind him, but closed as fists in front of him, and the face would be contorted with rage. Instead, Lincoln’s face is set, composed, unblinking in the face of reality. The hands are joined, almost as a symbol of the Union

he is determined to preserve—but notice that they are kept behind. Were they crossed before him, it would mean an end of forward motion. No, the man must lead the Union. He must endure a hurricane of abuse, and reconcile himself even to the prospect of failure, without whimper or casting blame; but he must always be prepared to move forward. Early in his career as an Illinois legislator, Lincoln said, “The probability that we may fall in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just; it shall not deter me.”

Francis Carpenter, who would go on to paint one of the greatest historical canvases in American history, the *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*, understood how the old masters of the old world “had delighted in representations of the birth from the ocean of Venus, the goddess of love,” drifting in sweetly to shore on the half-shell. But the new republic in the new world had witnessed a far greater birth—what Carpenter called “the immaculate conception of Constitutional Liberty.” Ninety years after being conceived in liberty, the republic had experienced a new birth of freedom: “The long prayed for year of jubilee had come; the bonds of the oppressed were loosed; the prison doors were opened.” Surely, Carpenter believed, a voice might proclaim from heaven: “Behold. . . how a Man may be exalted to a dignity and glory almost divine, and give freedom to a race. Surely Art should unite with Eloquence and Poetry to celebrate such a theme.” Today, it has, and this statue is the mark. For a moment, the heroic has reasserted itself—not the reeking heroic of kings and emperors,

but the heroic republican citizen, in broadcloth rather than in uniform. . . . armed with conviction, perseverance and ability rather than a sword. . . . standing, and always facing forward to the light. ■



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DID YOU KNOW?

Hillsdale College’s 2009 commencement ceremony took place on Saturday, May 9, and 258 seniors received degrees. The College’s 2008 graduation placement rate was 96 percent employed or attending graduate school within six months of graduation.