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# Imprimis

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December 2009 · Volume 38, Number 12

## Education, Economics, and Self-Government

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**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, an education and research organization based in Southern California. In 1996, he was the founding chairman of the California Civil Rights Initiative, the voter-approved ballot initiative that prohibited racial preferences in state employment, education, and contracting. He sits on the board of directors of several organizations, including the Heritage Foundation, the Army War College, and the Claremont Institute. He is the author of *Liberty and Learning: The Evolution of American Education*.

The following is adapted from speeches delivered in Indianapolis, Indiana, on September 24, and in Pocahontas, Arkansas, on October 19, 2009.

**I have** been asked to talk today about education and economic development. The standard thing to say on this topic is that the former is vital to the latter. We live in the modern world, so we all have to be highly informed and highly skilled and understand the power of modern science. It is a task of the very first importance to train a workforce that will be able to compete in the global marketplace. That is the standard thing to say, and we hear it said often by education bureaucrats from the federal level on down. And of course it is perfectly true, as far as it goes. But there is more to be said.

The practical point of this standard thing to say is that America needs more technical education—more scientists and mathematicians. And of course we do need scientists and mathematicians. But I like to remind people when they say this that the word “technical” comes from the Greek word “techne,” which means “art.” And Aristotle points out that art is about making, and that the question of what one should make is always superior, in point of order and logic, to the question of how to make it.

What does this mean? Consider one of the greatest scientific achievements of the last century—the development of the atomic bomb. The question of whether to build

an atomic bomb, and then the question of whether to drop it on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to end World War II without the need of invading and conquering the Japanese mainland, were more important questions—superior in order and logic—to the question of how to make the bomb. The brilliant physicists who accomplished the latter had immense technical training, but that training gave them no special knowledge about those more important questions. Or to put the point in a slightly different and more general way, a technical education can make a person wealthy and famous, but it does not teach that person what is best to do with wealth and fame.

So the first point I would make about education and economics is the importance of liberal arts education, which is the kind of education offered at Hillsdale College. Many think of liberal arts education as a broad education, but in fact it is a *high* education. We understand things to be arranged in a hierarchy. Hillsdale College has plenty of science and math majors, and our students go on to the very best graduate and professional schools. But whatever their majors, they learn the distinction I just made about questions of greater and lesser significance, and they study how to think about the very greatest ones.

The second point I want to make has to do with politics and education. The greatest example of economic development in human history was in the United States during the 19th century. At the beginning of that century, we were

about five million people huddled along the East Coast. By the end of it we had grown at a rate of about 25 percent—much faster than China is growing today—and had settled an entire continent, largely without the help of modern science. To the question of how it was done, I think the short answer is the Homestead Act—the greatest piece of legislation I know. Signed by President Lincoln in 1862, the Homestead Act is short and beautiful—two qualities good legislation should have, and two qualities in which legislation today is utterly lacking.

What the Homestead Act did was to take the western land of the United States—surely one of the greatest assets ever held by any government in history—and give 160-acre plots to anyone with the backbone to live on them and work them. These plots of land were granted regardless of who someone was and with the certainty that no one settling on them

could ever vote for this congressman or that. It is one of the greatest impartial acts of legislation in all of human history. It, and things like it, built America and the character of the people who spread across it.

How does this connect to my first point? It connects because the spirit of the Homestead Act, which led to unprecedented economic growth, could not be more different from the spirit of our legislation today. And the key to this difference is the difference between the education our leaders today have had, and the education students get at Hillsdale.

The principle that justified the Homestead Act has two

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[Latin]: in the first place

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parts, and both are found in the first 15 lines of the Declaration of Independence. The first is the idea of human equality—the idea that it does not matter what race or what family you come from, it only matters what you do—which has been the source of our greatest struggles in an attempt to live up to it. The second is the idea of the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” At Hillsdale College, we study the Declaration of Independence as the greatest thing of its kind. The signers of the Declaration were risking their lives. There is a beautiful passage at the end of it where they write, “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” But the document begins in an opposite mood, because the cause they are willing to die for is not specifically about them at all: “When in the course of human events”—that means not *our* time, but *any* time—“it becomes necessary for one people”—that means not *our* people, but *any* people—and then this sentence goes on to speak of the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” laws true always and everywhere.

Understood comprehensively, the Declaration points us to an unalterable law of God, visible in nature, that man is inferior to God and superior to the beasts, such that it is unjust for one human being to rule any other without his consent. And it is this same understanding of human nature on which Madison rests his case in *Federalist* 51, in explaining why government is both necessary and must be limited:

... [W]hat is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In

framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

This is the understanding that animates legislation like the Homestead Act. And note the humility in it. America’s founders understood themselves to be bound and limited by something higher. And it is precisely this understanding that is missing among our political leadership today. Nearly 20 years ago now, when Clarence Thomas was testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearings, several senators questioned him about the idea of natural law, which seemed to them a foreign and dangerous idea. And why would it seem that way?

These senators have been taught to understand government as a means by which they can do marvelous things, changing society for the better in countless and unlimited ways. And in this light, the old-fashioned idea of natural law—which, as we saw in the passage from Madison, leads to the idea of limited government—becomes simply an impediment to progress.

President Obama is an impressive man, and there is much good to be said about him. But he falls firmly into this newer school of thought. Let me read you a passage from his book, *The Audacity of Hope*:

Implicit in [the Constitution’s] structure, in the very idea of or-

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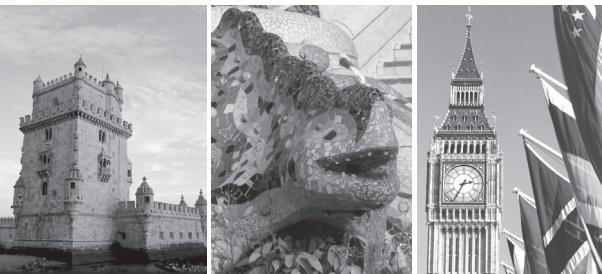
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dered liberty, was a rejection of absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or "ism," any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single, unalterable course. . . .

One can see immediately the practical results of this in the health care debate. Advocates of one of the latest plans are proud to place the cost at only \$900 billion—apparently it takes \$1 trillion to impress in this day and age! But consider that, in most of the plans that have advanced in the Congress, people making in the range of \$30,000 to \$80,000 a

year will be forced to pay health insurance costs—or fines of about the same amount—that come to between ten and 20 percent of their income. They will be compelled to buy plans that have certain specific features. There will be an allocation of health care resources as part of the plan. And it will not be legal to buy or sell a plan that does not fit the criteria. Compare the spirit of this legislation with the spirit of the Homestead Act. There is a bullying spirit behind it. And that bullying spirit is becoming ever more pervasive.

The means are already in place for the federal government to control what people say in elections. As a recent example of

how it tries this between elections, consider that Henry Waxman—a congressman of some power and influence—sent a letter in August to the CEOs of health care companies asking for schedules of all salaries above a certain amount, and of the conferences they had been to, and how much they cost, and who was there. Was it a coincidence that he wanted this information just as a health care debate was starting up? Could it be that he was trying to intimidate and silence potential opposition? One of the many “czars”—isn’t that an ominous word?—in the Obama administration is Cass Sunstein, the czar of regulatory policy. Mr. Sunstein is a very smart man—a law professor, like the president—but he is on record saying that speech rights should be redistributed by government bureaucrats much as wealth is redistributed through post-New Deal tax and entitlement policy. This is not supposed to be a country where there are czars dealing with things like speech. But it is such a country right now.

The economic policies being proposed these days are very bad. But the principles behind them are worse. They represent a return to the idea that the American Revolution repudiated—the idea that some are equipped by nature or training to manage the lives of others without their consent. I have been making the point lately that people are wrong who accuse the Obama administration of being socialist. I take the president at his word when he says that he has no desire to own the automobile companies. Instead, he wants to control them—and the rest of us as well—through a regulatory apparatus overseen by czars and bureaucrats. And again, his intentions are good. What is bad is the view underlying them of what human beings are. Rather than looking on us as equal beings with a set nature—such that none of us should rule another in the way that God rules man or man rules beast—our political leaders today have been taught to see us as material to be

shaped and perfected by experts who have the proper technical training.

It has been close to 100 years now that the majority of people teaching in American colleges and universities have agreed with Woodrow Wilson, one of the founders of the Progressive movement and the first to write explicitly that the Declaration of Independence is obsolete, and that we need to liberate the Constitution from the Declaration’s restraints. This liberation leads to the idea of a “living Constitution,” characterized by constant change or progress. Absolute truth, to the extent that ordinary people still believe in it, obstructs change or progress—which is why President Obama refers to it, in the passage I read, as tyrannical. But if change or progress is the rule, who is to determine what version of change or progress is good? And the logical problem here—as any Hillsdale student could tell you—is that once you deny the existence of absolute truth, the definition of “good” becomes subjective and the only standard of behavior is what we want—“we,” in the political sense, meaning the government or bureaucracy. It reduces politics not to right, but to force. That is why there is this bullying spirit about our government today, and why so many Americans are worried.

It is time for that to stop, and there are two conditions for stopping it. The first is for the ordinary folk of the United States to see in this the despotism that it is, and to rise up and repudiate it. The second thing is longer term, but equally vital: It is to replace leaders who have bad educations with leaders who have good educations. This is our work at Hillsdale College. We aim to recover the meaning of the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” and to place that meaning firmly in the minds and hearts of ambitious young men and women who have the courage to do something with that knowledge. And I swear that we shall not stop pursuing that task. ■



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