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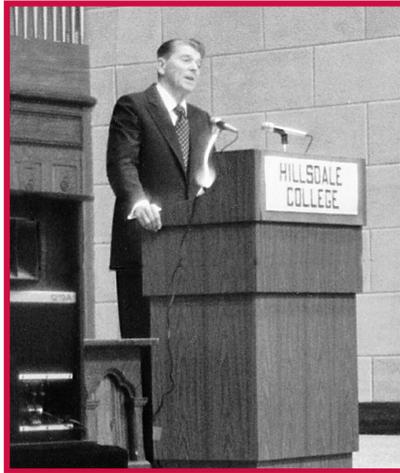
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Ronald Reagan, R.I.P.

by Larry P. Arnn
President, Hillsdale College



Ronald Reagan is the last president to make a mark with his oratory. When he was amidst the fray, his supporters always believed that he could go before the nation or any crowd and put everything right. He burst into politics during the Goldwater campaign when he, and not the candidate, gave the memorable oration. This was his famous “Time for Choosing” speech, and it was also his first step to the White House.

Of course it was not Reagan’s words alone that caused the Wall to come down in Berlin or the Evil Empire that built it to crumble. But the words were vital. In Reagan the word and deed came together as they have in only a few of our best presidents.

We can see both his nature and his understanding from the first speech he gave as president. Inaugural addresses are a hallowed American ceremony. The Constitution prescribes an oath that the president must take. Each has taken it since the first, George Washington. Each has then turned to make remarks to those assembled. Reagan’s first is worthy of the best of them, because it is like the best of them.

At his first inauguration, Reagan broke tradition in order to elevate it. For the first time he moved the ceremony around to the west side of the Capitol, the side of the building that looks out toward the National Mall. This permitted him to take us on a tour of the National Mall as his first executive act.

He begins the speech humbly. This is, he says, a “solemn and most momentous occasion for a few of us.” He means himself, his family, and his friends. But to the nation, “it is a commonplace occurrence.” It is the glory of the nation that presidents come and go peacefully and according to the popular will. Right away he demotes himself below the Constitution and the nation whose liberty it preserves. He celebrates not himself, but the rule of law.

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Lay Your Hammer Down

Commencement Address to the Hillsdale College Class of 2004

Edwin J. Feulner

President, The Heritage Foundation

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EDWIN J. FEULNER is president of the Heritage Foundation. He has studied at the University of Edinburgh, the London School of Economics, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown University and Regis University. He is the author of five books, including *Intellectual Pilgrims* and *The March of Freedom*, and has published articles in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major newspapers. Dr. Feulner is treasurer and trustee of the Mont Pelerin Society; trustee and former chairman of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute; member of the board of the National Chamber Foundation; member of the board of visitors of George Mason University; and a trustee of the Acton Institute and the International Republican Institute. He is past president of several organizations, including the Philadelphia Society and the Mont Pelerin Society, and has served on many congressional and executive branch commissions. He was domestic policy consultant to President Ronald Reagan, and among his many awards and honors is a Presidential Citizen's Medal conferred by President Reagan on January 18, 1989.

The following speech was delivered on May 8, 2004, on the East Lawn of the Hillsdale campus, at the 152nd Hillsdale College Commencement Exercises.

In 1969 a Stanford University psychologist named Philip Zimbardo set up an experiment. He arranged for two cars to be abandoned — one on the mean streets of the Bronx, New York, the other in an affluent neighborhood near Stanford in Palo Alto, California. The license plates had been removed, and the hoods were left open. Zimbardo wanted to see what would happen to the cars.

In the Bronx, he soon found out. Ten minutes after the car was abandoned, people began stealing parts from it. Within three days the car was stripped. When there was nothing useful left to take, people smashed windows and ripped out upholstery, until the car was trashed.

In Palo Alto, something quite different happened: nothing. For more than a week the car sat there unmolested. Zimbardo was puzzled, but he had a hunch about human nature. To test it, he went out and, in full view of everyone, took a sledgehammer and smashed part of the car. Soon, passersby were taking turns with the hammer, delivering blow after satisfying blow. Within a few hours, the vehicle was resting on its roof, demolished.

At this point, you might be wondering what all this has to do with graduating from Hillsdale.

“Why did this man come from Washington to tell us about cars that were abandoned in a psychology experiment 35 years ago?” I promise I’ll try to make that story relevant to this happy occasion.

I know today is special for you because you’re leaving this campus to enter the next phase of your lives. For me, arriving here is a delightful experience. My work in Washington consists largely of grappling with policy issues that boil down to how the federal government spends our tax money. You can’t imagine what a wonderful breath of fresh air it is for me to visit a college that refuses to accept federal funding. This is one of the very few places in America where I truly am away from all of the “inside the Beltway conspiracies” to get more money out of the taxpayers.

But beyond that, as your president has said, this is an “institution that is tied to the principles of the United States.” Hillsdale is indeed a very special place.

But let me now return to those abandoned cars: Among the scholars who took note of Zimbardo’s experiment were two criminologists, James Q. Wilson, who is now the Ronald Reagan Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University, and George Kelling. The experiment gave rise to their now famous “broken windows” theory of crime, which is illustrated by a common experience: When a broken window in a building is left unrepaired, the rest of the windows are soon broken by vandals.

Why is this? Aside from the fact that it's fun to break windows, why does the broken window invite further vandalism? Wilson and Kelling say it's because the broken window sends a signal that no one is in charge here, that breaking more windows costs nothing, that it has no undesirable consequences. The broken window is their metaphor for a whole host of ways that behavioral norms can break down in a community. If one person scrawls graffiti on a wall, others will soon be at it with their spray cans. If one aggressive panhandler begins working a block, others will soon follow. In short, once people begin disregarding the norms that keep order in a community, both order and community unravel, sometimes with astonishing speed.

Police in big cities have dramatically cut crime rates by applying this theory. Rather than concentrate on felonies such as robbery and assault, they aggressively enforce laws against relatively minor offenses — graffiti, public drinking, panhandling, littering.

When order is visibly restored at that level, a signal is sent out: This is a community where behavior does have consequences. If you can't get away with jumping a turnstile into the subway, you'd better not try armed robbery.

Broken Civility

Now all this is a preface. My topic is not crime on city streets. Rather I want to speak about incivility in the marketplace of ideas. The broken windows theory is what links the two.

As the head of a think tank in Washington, I work exclusively in the marketplace of ideas. Our job at the Heritage Foundation is to engage in a wide range of public debates about public policy issues. We put forward traditional conservative policy options and ideas with the aim of persuading others to our viewpoint on the whole range of national policies — both international and domestic.

What we're seeing in the marketplace of ideas today is a disturbing growth of incivility that follows and confirms the broken windows theory. Alas, this breakdown of civil norms is not a failing of either the political left or right exclusively. It spreads across the political spectrum from one end to the other.

A few examples: A liberal writes a book calling Rush Limbaugh a "big fat idiot." A conservative writes a book calling liberals "useful idiots." A liberal writes a book titled *The Lies of George W. Bush*. A conservative writes a book subtitled "Liberal Lies About the American Right." A liberal publishes a detailed "case for Bush-hatred." A conserva-

tive declares, "Even Islamic terrorists don't hate America like liberals do."

Those few examples — and unfortunately there are many, many more — come from elites in the marketplace of ideas. All are highly educated people who write nationally syndicated columns, publish best-selling books, and are hot tickets on radio and television talk shows.

Further down the food chain, lesser lights take up smaller hammers, but they commit even more degrading incivilities. The Internet, with its easy access and worldwide reach, is a breeding ground for Web sites with names like Bushbodycount.com and Toostupidtobepresident.com. This is how the broken windows theory plays out in the marketplace of ideas. If you want to see it working in real time, try the following: Log on to AOL, and go to one of the live chat rooms reserved for political chat. Someone will post a civil comment on some political topic. Almost immediately, someone else will swing the verbal hammer of incivility, and from there the chat degrades into a food fight, with invective and insult as the main course.

This illustrates the first aspect of the broken windows theory, which we saw with the car in Palo Alto. Once someone wields the hammer — once the incivility starts — others will take it as an invitation to join in, and pretty soon there's no limit to the incivility. And if you watch closely in that chat room, you'll see something else happening. Watch the screen names of people who make civil comments. Some — a few — will join in the food fight. But most will log off. Their screen names just disappear. They leave because the atmosphere has turned hostile to anything approaching a civil exchange or a real dialogue.

This illustrates the second aspect of the broken windows theory: Once the insults begin flying, many will opt out. Wilson and Kelling describe this response when the visible signs of order deteriorate in a neighborhood:

Many residents will think that crime, especially violent crime, is on the rise, and they will modify their behavior accordingly. They will use the streets less often, and when on the streets will stay apart from their fellows, moving with averted eyes, silent lips, and hurried steps. Don't get involved. For some residents, this growing atomization will matter little.... But it will matter greatly to other people, whose lives derive meaning and satisfaction from local attachments... [F]or them, the neighborhood will cease to exist except for a few reliable friends whom they arrange to meet.

The chat room shows us that a similar response occurs when civility breaks down in the marketplace of ideas. Many people withdraw and tune out, regardless of whether the incivility occurs in a chat room, on a talk show, in a newspaper column, in political campaign ads, or on the floor of the Congress. This is the real danger of incivility. Our free, self-governing society requires an open exchange of ideas, which in turn requires a certain level of civility rooted in mutual respect for each other's opinions and viewpoints.

What we see today, I am afraid, is an accelerating competition between the left and the right to see which side can inflict the most damage with the hammer of incivility. Increasingly, those who take part in public debates appear to be exchanging ideas when, in fact, they are trading insults: idiot, liar, moron, traitor.

Civility and Character

Earlier this week I was in London and attended a dinner honoring Lady Margaret Thatcher on the 25th anniversary of her accession to the Prime Ministership of Great Britain. As you know, she is a good friend of Hillsdale College and has visited your campus. She was also a great political leader and has always been a model of civility.

If you want to grasp the nature of civility, try to imagine Lady Thatcher calling someone a "big fat idiot." You will instantly understand that civility isn't an accessory one can put on or take off like a scarf. It is inseparable from the character of great leaders.

I also happen to believe that our President, George W. Bush, is a model of civil discourse, and I only wish that everyone else in the political arena would take a lesson from his example.

Incivility is not a social blunder to be compared with using the wrong fork. Rather, it betrays a defect of character. Incivility is dangerous graffiti, regardless of whether it is spray-painted on a subway car or embossed on the title page of a book. The broken windows theory shows us the dangers in both cases.

But those cases aren't parallel in every way, and in closing I want to call your attention to an important difference. When behavioral norms break down in a community, police can restore order. But when civility breaks down in the marketplace of ideas, the law is powerless to set things right. And properly so: Our right to speak freely – even with incivility, if we choose – is guaranteed by those five glorious words in

the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law...." And yet, the need for civility has never been greater. Our nation is divided as never before between the left and the right. We are at loggerheads on profoundly important political and social questions. Meanwhile, civilization itself is under barbaric attack from without.

Sadly, too many of us are not rising to these challenges as a democratic people. On the contrary, we've seen a 40-year decline in voter participation in national elections. In the last two presidential elections, fewer than half of eligible voters bothered to vote. Rather than helping to reverse this decline, the rising chorus of incivility is driving out citizens of honest intent and encouraging those who trade in jeering and mockery.

Fortunately, this is not the stuff of Hillsdale.

If we are to prevail as a free, self-governing people, we must first govern our tongues and our pens. Restoring civility to public discourse is not an option. It is a necessity.

Who will begin the restoration of civility? I hope you will. Your graduation today is proof that you're up to the job, and I urge you to take it on as a serious, lifelong commitment.

Graduating senior Jennifer Meyer said today that this college has given her – and all of you – "all that is virtuous in one's life." Civility is, I firmly believe, one of those virtues. After four years of study at Hillsdale, you know the difference between attacking a person's argument and attacking a person's character. Respect that difference.

Your education here has taught you how to engage in rational debate and either hold your own or lose with grace and civility. Take that lesson with you.

Your professors at Hillsdale have shown you, by their example, that you don't need the hammer of incivility to make your point. Follow their example. Defend your convictions – those virtues – with all the spirit you can. But do it with all the civility that you ought. As you leave this special place, lay your hammer down.

I wish you Godspeed on your journey through life. Thank you, and congratulations to the Class of 2004.





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Ronald Reagan, R.I.P.

(continued from page one)

Reagan proceeds to give us, his fellow citizens, a challenge: “We the people” must govern ourselves, otherwise (and here he paraphrases Lincoln) “who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?” In this country “our Government has no power except that granted it by the people.” And that is why “here, in this land, we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man . . .”

Then he turns to the theme of heroism, one of his favorites. He mentions factory workers and farmers, clerks and entrepreneurs.

From these ordinary Americans he turns to certain famous men. Directly before him, he notices, is the monument to a “monumental man.” Washington, the Father of Our Country, was a man of “humility who came to greatness reluctantly.” Off to the side is Jefferson: “The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence.”

And farther out are “the dignified columns of the Lincoln Memorial. Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln.”

This admiration of the hero by Reagan is no idle reverie. At the end he turns to Arlington National Cemetery, where the soldiers are buried. The crosses and Stars of David “add up to only a tiny fraction of the price that has been paid for our freedom.”

And then comes a wonderful thing, a thing that establishes the connection between these

famous heroes and ordinary citizens. Before each cross and Star of David “is a monument to the kinds of hero I spoke of earlier.” This means that before each marker is planted another George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

Reagan gives an example, the first of the many citizen heroes that he would later name in his State of the Union addresses. Buried there in Arlington is Martin Treptow, killed on the western front in Europe in 1917. In his diary, Treptow wrote: “America must win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.”

This message of self government, founded in our rights, depending upon each of us doing his duty, is the message of Ronald Reagan, as it was the message of Washington and Lincoln before him.

May he rest easy, as he would say, “wrapped in God’s loving arms.” 



The legacy of Ronald Reagan will be studied at a five-day seminar on the Hillsdale campus this fall. In 2006, Hillsdale College will dedicate a statue of Reagan to be located near a statue of one of his partners in the fight for freedom, Margaret Thatcher.

Cover Photo: Ronald Reagan speaking at Hillsdale College on November 10, 1977.

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