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"Never Give In"

The Honorable Clarence Thomas
Associate Justice, United States Supreme Court



CLARENCE THOMAS has been an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court since 1991. Prior to that he served as a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, as chairman of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and as assistant secretary for civil rights in the U.S. Department of Education. Justice Thomas graduated cum laude from the College of the Holy Cross and earned a J.D. from Yale Law School before entering legal practice as assistant attorney general of Missouri and, later, as an attorney with the Monsanto Company.

Justice Thomas delivered the following remarks at the installation of Dr. Larry P. Arnn as the twelfth president of Hillsdale College, September 9, 2000, on Hillsdale's East Lawn.

It is a great honor to be with you here today, and to join in the celebration surrounding the installation of your twelfth President and my dear friend, Larry Arnn. But for Hillsdale College, this event is more than a celebration. It is an opportunity for this venerable institution to rededicate itself to its founding principles of seven score and sixteen years ago. By choosing a man to lead it who understands those principles, who has studied and toiled for those principles his entire adult life, Hillsdale demonstrates its continuing commitment to true learning and freedom in a world all too hostile to both.

To a large degree, the principles of Hillsdale College are the principles of America. The founders of the college declared their gratitude "to God for the inestimable blessings resulting from the prevalence of civil and religious liberty" with which He has favored the people of this land, just as America's Founders called upon the protection of Divine Providence in their effort to secure for themselves and their countrymen the God-given, unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness. And the founders of this great College opened its doors to "all persons, irrespective of nation, color, or sex," just as America's Founders committed our nation to the idea that all human beings are created equal.

To understand just how radical the founding of Hillsdale College was, we have to take ourselves back to 1844. Thomas Jefferson, one of the last living Founders, had been dead almost 20 years. The Constitution, ordained and established to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, was over half a century old, but still contained the terrible compromise with slavery that stood in stark opposition to the very idea of liberty. John Tyler had become America's tenth President upon the untimely death of William Henry Harrison in 1841, and as John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary, no one who had supported Tyler's nomination for Vice-President "ever thought of his being placed in the Executive chair." At 51, Tyler was at the time the youngest man to have served as president and the first to have been born after the Revolution. He was not even really a member of the party that elected him, having been nominated primarily to balance the Whig ticket. Whig party leaders were mostly anti-slavery men of the North and West, whereas Tyler was a Virginia slaveowner. As a member of Congress during the Missouri

Compromise debate he had fought against permitting Congress to outlaw slavery in the territories. Daniel Webster, who had been Harrison's Secretary of State, resigned over Tyler's push to annex Texas on terms that might have led to five new slave states and destroyed the delicate balance between free and slave states that had been maintained since the Missouri Compromise. Tyler replaced Webster with John C. Calhoun, the leading spokesman for the idea that slavery was a "positive good," and Tyler himself would later be elected to the Confederate House of Representatives. Meanwhile, in the presidential election of 1844, the very year Hillsdale College was founded, many even in the North voted for President James Polk, a Tennessee slaveowner, in order to secure the annexation of Texas.

This moral and political state of affairs in the 1840s represented a decline since the time of the American founding. Michigan's territorial charter, for instance, had been enacted in 1787, the same summer as the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. That charter, the Northwest Ordinance, established the government for the territory northwest of the Ohio River, in what would eventually become Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. It provided that "there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes," thereby beginning to make good on the promise of the Revolution. In 1816, Indiana became the first state in the nation to require in its constitution that its public schools be "equally open to all." But in the 1840s, the Supreme Court of Indiana repudiated that provision in favor of racial segregation. Michigan was admitted to statehood in 1835, the fourth state created out of the Northwest Territory. Its constitution required the legislature to provide for a public school in every district in the state. But in 1841, the Michigan legislature established an overlay district in the City of Detroit, "not described by metes and bounds, but composed of the colored children of the city."

This was the stage on which Hillsdale College was founded, and on which it announced its mission of furnishing a literary and scientific education to all persons, irrespective of race or sex. The founders of Hillsdale College did not adopt this position, like so many of our elite institutions in later years, under legal compulsion, or because it was the fashionable thing to do. They adopted it because it was right. But how did they know this? How, indeed, can we know it? How can we confidently assert that the principles of Hillsdale and America are right, and that opposing principles are wrong? That, it seems to me, is the other important side of Hillsdale College's mission. Its tradi-

tional liberal arts curriculum introduces its students to the greatest books of both ancient and modern times. By studying these books, students become confident of the existence of permanent standards of right and wrong, and are led to discover through their own thinking the same truths that formed the basis of our nation, the "laws of nature and of nature's God" that underlie our unalienable rights and our tradition of limited government.

This liberal arts curriculum, the great books of the western tradition, and the ideas they uphold are under attack today, just as the principles of 1776 were besieged in 1844. The assault is a massive one, and Hillsdale College is a small place with very few allies. But the ideas that Hillsdale represents and defends are not small. They are great and they are timeless. They can withstand the temporary setbacks that result from our human imperfections. But their long-term practical success is by no means guaranteed. That success requires our constant vigilance, our constant study, our constant devotion. And in this world where many — even many we might count as friends — have repudiated America's ancient faith as obsolete or worse, we must defend that faith with statesmanlike intelligence. And in that light, I can think of no one better to lead Hillsdale College today than the man you have chosen; Larry Arnn, who has studied under the foremost authorities on the greatest statesmen of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill.

Larry Arnn earned his doctoral degree from the Claremont Graduate School. There he studied with Harry Jaffa, whose life work recovered for our time an appreciation of Lincoln's profound understanding of the Declaration of Independence and the moral conditions of limited, constitutional government. From Claremont, Larry traveled back to the land of our nation's origin, to England, where he studied at Oxford and became the director of research for Sir Martin Gilbert, the official biographer of Winston Churchill. He helped Sir Martin tell the story of Churchill's tireless defense of freedom, in the face of overwhelming odds, against the specter of godless tyranny. Churchill's tremendous strength of soul enabled him almost single-handedly to lead his nation, and indeed the free world, from the brink of darkness to their finest hour.

From Lincoln and Churchill, Larry Arnn learned the lessons that will gird him for the task ahead. For make no mistake: there is more at risk here than the success or failure of a single, small college in the middle of the old Northwest Territory. You people of Hillsdale College — trustees, faculty and staff, and most of all you students — have a mission to fulfill. You are on the front lines of a battle of ideas that will determine whether

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Hillsdale's and America's time-honored principles will continue to guide our lives and keep us free. To lead you in this mission you will need, and fortunately you have, someone who has learned two important lessons from two great statesmen.

From Lincoln, Larry Arnn learned that equality – the God-given equality of rights and opportunity that has animated Hillsdale College from its earliest days – is the central moral principle of our nation, and the basis of individual freedom and limited government. And from his study of Churchill he learned that freedom requires unflinching devotion and unflappable courage. In fighting for freedom we must "never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never... never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.

Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

So today I congratulate you upon your new President, who both understands and is equipped to fight for the principles of Hillsdale College and America, and to preserve and defend this great institution as a shining example of what a classical liberal arts education is all about.▲

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