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Four Pillars: Educating for America

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on December 6, 2019, during a Christmas Open House at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C.

This Fall at Hillsdale College, we did something strange, stranger than if we had found a unicorn and built a zoo to show it off. We celebrated, *with a whole heart*, the founding of our College 175 years ago. Yes, most of our founders were white. Yes, most of them were male. All of them are now dead. What can we be thinking, to celebrate *people like that* in this day and age?

There are two reasons, one particular and one general.

The particular one has to do with these founders themselves. They were human, sure enough, but they were very good humans. The earliest of them were classically

educated New England preachers. They thought liberal education was the road to good living, good citizenship, and good statesmanship. They thought to get this liberal education it is better to read the classic books in the classic languages, Greek and Latin, and those were prerequisites for admission to the College.

These founders were patriots. The first line of the College’s Articles of Association of 1844 commits the College to perpetuating the “inestimable blessings” of “civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety.” We obscure the fact these days that the Americans who founded our country were mostly Christians, and they were devoted to both civil *and* religious liberty with the same intensity that they held their faith. They thought that the Christian religion, the first universal religion not to provide government to the faithful, would therefore have to be practiced in many countries—and that those countries should provide for the right to do so, or else be wrong. Claiming that right for themselves, they also respected it for others. “Do as you would be done by.”

These founders thought that liberal education should cultivate the practice of the moral alongside the intellectual virtues. College is about thinking, and the refinement and informing of the intellect is its first purpose. This requires in turn the education of the whole human being. Humans not only think, but also do. Their doing and their thinking work together to form their characters. If their characters are not courageous, moderate, and

just, then not only will they be craven in action, but their thinking will be impaired.

These founders thought that liberal education required thinking about God, known to reason and in philosophy as the perfection of all being, known to these founders’ faith as Jesus Christ. They followed the classics in thinking that all of our judgments of good and bad, better and worse, implies some standard that is complete or perfect. In philosophy properly pursued, the subject of God cannot be neglected. Their Christian faith was grounded partly in the fact that the Christian God, of all revealed deities, is the most open to thinking.

These founders believed in freedom. They were grateful, as I say, for the inestimable blessings of civil and religious freedom. These two kinds of freedom were combined and wholly supported for the first time in America. These founders were proud of this fact. They dedicated the oldest building on our campus, still standing, on the Fourth of July

with a speech about freedom and learning. They respected both the Declaration of Independence and its partner, the Constitution. In their noble and significant opposition to human slavery, they helped to devise the platform upon which Abraham Lincoln was elected president. That platform called for an end to slavery by constitutional means only, specifically to bring an end to it by forbidding it to spread any further into the vast area not yet incorporated as states. And when the Civil War came, no college had a nobler record: our campus

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

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was emptied of young men. Several dozens of them would fight with distinction at Gettysburg. Three would win the Congressional Medal of Honor.

These are the four chief elements, the four pillars, of the founding of Hillsdale College: learning, character, faith, and freedom. The College's founders saw these things not as items on a discrete list, but as a description of the complete human being and of the well-lived human life. Of course colleges proceed by argument, evidence, and proof, and here at Hillsdale we argue about anything, including these elements. We preserve them as well because they lay the ground for that argument, for its continuing civility and probity, for the advancement of learning, and for the preservation of the freedom to do it. They are a prescription for civilization.

Colleges today are increasingly collections of hostile identity groups, each clamoring against the crimes of the other. Students are not invited to step outside themselves, to step outside their own time, and to look at things as they have been understood by the best over time. If they did that, they would then learn and grow not by invention but by discovery.

I will say personally that these four elements brought me to Hillsdale in the year 2000. I had avoided all employment in colleges for the first two decades of my adult life. I did not think that colleges were a good place to serve, given what most of them had become. But I came upon Hillsdale's founding document, and I thought it beautiful. I noticed that it was written by people who served in the cause of Lincoln. I reflected that Lincoln, and also (to name the best examples) Churchill and Washington, were able to command allegiance, not to themselves, but to a cause. They could describe this cause in beautiful language. They could make themselves a conspicuous example of obedience to it. Only then could they

legitimately ask others to join them. Of course I can look up at them "only at a steep angle" (to quote the great Mark Helprin). But their example shows the way.

These elements are also principles. The word "principle" comes from an old word that means first. When we speak of the principle of a thing, we think of how it began. Yet it has to mean more than that. If a thing changes its principle, then there is a new "first" and therefore a new thing. That is why when we think of principle, we think not only of the beginning, but also of the essential something that makes a thing what it is. Principle means *first* but also *essence*. Thinking like this, we felt that we could celebrate the beginnings of the College with a whole heart. The beginning was good, and it has been the same College all the

time since, despite many changes. If the College were not the same *in principle*, then it could not be 175 years old, and there could be no celebration.

The principle or essence of a college begins with

the fact that it is a partnership, a kind of community. That is what the word "college" means. Communities are grounded directly in the essential element of human nature, reason, which is a synonym for speech. We are the thinking beings, and we can share our thoughts by talking.

Any kind of close community can be a college, but chiefly the word denotes an institution of higher learning. Higher learning is not learning about means but ends. Ends are higher than means, and the highest ends are the best and most beautiful to know. Such ends are indicated in authoritative American use by the expression, "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." That phrase is used in the Declaration

of Independence to justify the nation itself. In a simple way, the expression refers only to the things we know by reason. But *nature* is a pregnant word, and so is *God*, and so is *law*. To learn deeply the meaning of those words requires years of study of the greatest books, old and new.

This is what our College was founded to do, and what it does still. That is the particular reason for our celebration of our founding and of our founders.

The general reason for our celebration can be seen in the nature and ground of the contemporary aversion to such things. What are the objections?

In former times, the most thoughtful people valued the old or the new only insofar as they gave a clue to the eternal and transcendent. In seeking the transcendent, they believed that old things did have a certain dignity on their face: they have the advantage of persistence, which is one part of virtue. Things that have been thought good for a long time are worthy of attention, respect, and study. New things are harder to judge. Nonetheless, both old and new things must meet the test of permanence and transcendence.

To the modern ear, that sounds antiquated. Today the theme is not permanence, but change; not transcendence, but presence. Change is the master key to everything. Change can be eternal only in the sense that everything changes. But if everything changes, nothing is permanent, and nothing is transcendent. Today we are trying to make a transcendent good out of the one thing that cannot transcend.

These doctrines, growing up in modern philosophy, have had disastrous effects upon the academic world. Colleges can barely, if at all, preserve the civility to think and talk. Rather than partnerships, they become increasingly collections of hostile

identity groups, each clamoring against the crimes of the other. Students are not invited to step outside themselves, to step outside their own time, and to look at things as they have been understood by the best over time. If they did that, they would find that the great books are not a parade of agreements but attempts to approximate truth that frequently differ from one another. They would see that some are more successful than others, and they would then learn and grow not by invention but by discovery.

This departure from the old idea of a college is having disastrous effects in politics, too. Recall that our liberty in the Declaration of Independence is justified by a rational standard, the “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal.” This means a sort of tautology: all men are men. This simple observation gives rise to a world of consequences: one may govern a horse or another kind of beast without the consent of that being. Horses are not capable of giving consent. But one may not govern human beings without consent. This is a thing recognizable by ordinary human common sense.

Americans have enjoyed more freedom and justice for more people, and for a longer time, than any people. A major reason for that is the dignity and compelling nature of the principles in the Declaration of Independence. If freedom and equality are established in the nature of things, then they may not be violated rightly by anyone, even if he is the King of England or the totalitarian dictator of Germany. These people may be powerful, but they cannot be in the right.

If, on the other hand, everything is change, who can say that new purposes of government might not arise and that a new status for the human being might be found? We live in the age of technology. Technology comes from two old words that mean knowing how to make. If technology is the ultimate standard, then the society itself becomes an engineering project,



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of which we become the subjects. Here, recall that Hillary Clinton has famously spoken of “redefin[ing] who we are as human beings in this post-modern age.”

We are facing a situation like the ones our forebears faced in the American Revolution and the Civil War. The claim in the first was that some or one, specifically King George III, is born to rule others. The claim in the second was that some of one skin color are born to rule others. These were abnegations of the Declaration of Independence, which means that the divisions in the land were deep—as they are again today.

Modern liberalism in America begins with two ideas: one, everything is change; two, we should use science to get control of the process of change and make the society into what we want it to be. This is the engineering project that has significantly changed the way we are governed. It threatens to change our way of life decisively and for all time.

To put these points in the language of classical philosophy, the Declaration of Independence states the *final causes*—which means ultimate purposes—of America. Something must be added to that in order to keep freedom safe. There must be a constitution, which is a form of government. There must be established rules by which citizens give their consent. These must be somewhat flexible, but more than that they need to provide

a stable and abiding structure. This is the *formal cause* of any government—it is what any government looks like. The form or formal cause of our government is the Constitution of the United States, which provides long-term rules for how we go about giving our consent. It is the most successful document of its kind ever written.

Today, the form of our government is fundamentally altered—the Constitution has been largely replaced with an alternative form. The simplest way to explain the alteration is also the key to the whole situation: the great majority of our laws at the federal level are not made by Congress anymore. This means that the people we elect to make the laws delegate that work to someone else. Actually they delegate it to many people, collected in independent executive agencies numbering about 150. These agencies make a very great number of laws, and there is no ready way for the people to correct those laws. Those who founded our nation and the thinkers upon whom they drew believed that such an arrangement would destroy the accountability of the government to the people, and therefore destroy the ground of government by consent.

In recent years these developments have taken a new and dangerous turn. Today we know that people in law enforcement and intelligence at the

federal level have acted in partisan ways. We know this because they have said so. Meanwhile the president is accused of obstruction of justice—for a time he was accused of this because he told the director of the FBI what to do. But where does the director of the FBI get his authority? He works for the attorney general, and the attorney general works for the president, with the consent of the Senate for his appointment only. The authority of those who hold these unelected offices is made legitimate by the fact that they are under the control of people who are elected. But is it clear any longer that the holders of these offices understand this? If the modern idea is correct—if it is true that experts should rule in order to guide us scientifically toward a better future—then maybe the unelected people who hold these offices are more legitimate than the president and the Senate.

That is where we are headed. What to do? As long as we still have free elections, the key, as usual, is understanding.

Hillsdale's Four Pillars Campaign, launched this Fall in conjunction with the College's 175th anniversary, is named for the four purposes of our mission—learning, character, faith, and freedom. The money will go to improve our pursuit of these things on the campus and make that pursuit radiate across the country on behalf of liberty.

Hillsdale decided several decades ago to share what we do and learn. Just as at the founding of the College, we have sought to benefit, as we benefit from, our fellow citizens. *Imprimis* was sent free of charge to about 1,000 households and businesses when it began 47 years ago. The number had

reached 900,000 when I arrived 20 years ago. It will soon rise to over five million.

Hillsdale offers online courses and makes them available, free of charge, to any citizen wishing to learn. Already we have well over two million online students, and we are confident that this will be a mighty engine to help us reach many millions more.

In an age of confusion that has become dangerous, Hillsdale offers the only thing that can ultimately dispel it: understanding. It was to provide that understanding that the College was born 175 years ago. God and our many friends around the country have been providing us the means to do so on an increasingly large scale.

We now have 23 Hillsdale-affiliated classical charter schools in eleven states, as well as two private schools operating under Hillsdale guidelines and with Hillsdale's assistance. These schools have 15,000 students enrolled and 7,500 students on wait lists. New schools are opening each year, and we can't find teachers and principals fast enough to meet the demand.

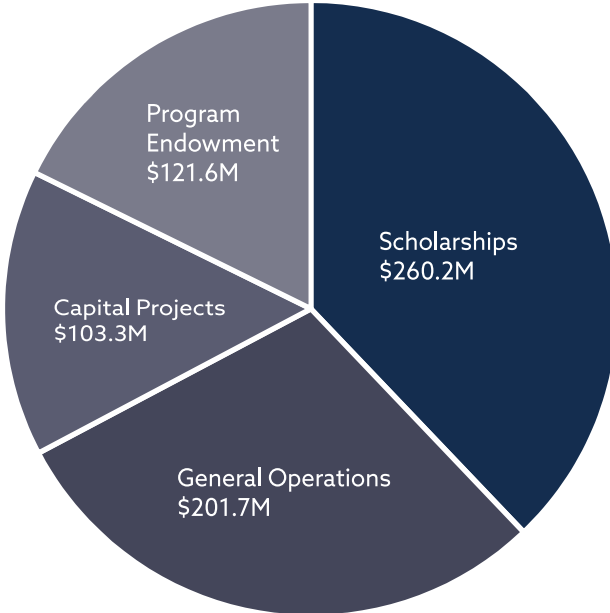
In an age of confusion that has become dangerous, Hillsdale offers the only thing that can ultimately dispel it: understanding. It was to provide that understanding that the College was born 175 years ago. God and our many friends around the country have been providing us the means to do so on an increasingly large scale. We will continue to work tirelessly, and with our fellow citizens we are determined to save our Constitution and our country.

We at Hillsdale College have not found a unicorn, but something infinitely more valuable. Not human completion, but the lamp by which to seek wisdom and the reason to strive for courage and all the moral virtues. Not comprehension of the divine, but a way to think about God and understand Him better. Seeing our freedom



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For more information, visit fourpillars.hillsdale.edu.

in danger, we have found a way to justify it against the mighty powers that gather in opposition.

We have found in short the principle, and therefore the essence, of the human. Created in the image of God, humans are meant to know, to be free, and to love the best things. These things are not automatic: they must be cultivated. This cultivation gives the College, as it gives all human life, the purpose that

makes it what it is. We think we and all others have a right to pursue this cultivation. It is the ultimate human right, and it must be defended.

This is why we are grateful for the blessing of the College, for the length of its life, for the good that it calls us to find. We will do our utmost to preserve and improve it so that another 175 years will be possible. Join us, as so many of you have and do, in that work. ■