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Freedom and Its Counterfeit

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Dr. George delivered the following commencement address to the Hillsdale College Class of 2003 on in the George Roche Health Education and Sports Complex. Following the speech, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Science.

Freedom and Its Counterfeit

It is a great honor to have the opportunity to address you this afternoon and to join the ranks of the honorary alumni of this eminent institution. To those who are graduating today, and to their families, I offer congratulations for all that you have achieved, and best wishes as you grasp the opportunities, and confront the challenges, now before you.

The blessing of a Hillsdale College education – a true liberal arts education – has prepared you literally to take on the world. And ours is most assuredly a world in need of being taken on by men and women possessed of the intellectual treasures of understanding, knowledge and wisdom. I pray, and I trust, that these gifts, vouchsafed to you by the faculty of this College and its many generous benefactors, will in your hands become powerful instruments of reform and renewal in those many domains of endeavor to which you, the members of the Class of 2003, will dedicate yourselves.

Not one of you needs me to tell you, though I will remind you anyway, that your Hillsdale

education is a gift for which you must be ever grateful. It imposes upon you responsibilities of which you must be ever mindful. As to certain of those responsibilities, the alumni here present can assure you that President Arnn will be in touch from time to time with a gentle – or not so gentle – reminder. And I know you will be generous, just as those who have gone before you have been generous. But the gift of a Hillsdale education imposes yet more profound responsibilities: responsibilities of service.

“To whom much is given,” the Bible says, “much is required.” And to each of you, much indeed has been given.

That you are up to the challenge, none of us doubts. Indeed, we are gathered today to celebrate the fact that you have already proven your mettle in important respects. Your education at Hillsdale has been a classically demanding one. It has required of you careful study, deep and sustained reflection and hard work. The degree you will have the honor of receiving in a few minutes is a testament to your achievement in meeting the rigorous academic standards that this college proudly upholds. Bravo to Hillsdale for demanding of you nothing short of excellence! Bravo to each of you for meeting the demand!

From its founding during the struggle over slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, Hillsdale College has stood for freedom and for the basic moral truths and principles of civic life that are at once the foundations of freedom and among the great ends to which freedom is ordered. In the halls of this college, it has always been securely understood that ignorance of these truths and principles places freedom in dire jeopardy. Today, this understanding makes Hillsdale very nearly unique in contemporary higher education, where it is fashionable to deny that there is such a thing as truth and to embrace relativist and subjectivist doctrines that abet the deconstruction of the very concept of freedom and its replacement by a counterfeit.

Freedom, Truth and Virtue

True freedom consists in the liberation of the human person from the shackles of ignorance, oppression and vice. Thus it was that one hundred and fifty years ago this July 4, Edmund B. Fairfield, president of Hillsdale, speaking at a ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone of a new college building, declared that education, by lifting a man out of ignorance, “disqualifies him from being a slave.” What overcomes ignorance is knowledge, and the object of knowledge is truth – empirical, moral, spiritual. “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

True freedom, the freedom that liberates, is grounded in truth and ordered to truth and, therefore, to virtue. A free person is enslaved neither to the sheer will of another nor to his own appetites and passions. A free person lives uprightly, fulfilling his obligations to family, community, nation and God. By contrast, a person given over to his appetites and passions, a person who scoffs at truth and chooses to live, whether openly or secretly, in defiance of the moral law is not free. He is simply a different kind of slave.

The counterfeit of freedom consists in the idea of personal and communal liberation from morality, responsibility and truth. It is what our nation’s founders expressly distinguished from liberty and condemned as “license.” The so-called freedom celebrated today by so many of our opinion-shaping elites in education, entertainment and the media is simply the license to do whatever one pleases. This false conception of freedom – false because disordered, disordered because detached from moral truth and civic responsibility – shackles those in its grip no less powerfully than did the chattel slavery of old. Enslavement to one’s own appetites and passions is no less brutal a form of bondage for being a slavery of the soul. It is no less tragic, indeed, it is in certain respects immeasurably more tragic, for being self-imposed. It is ironic, is it not, that people who celebrate slavery to appetite and passion call this bondage “freedom”?

Counterfeit freedom is worse than fraudulent. It is the mortal enemy of the real thing. Counterfeit freedom can provide no rational account or defense of its own normative claims. It speaks the language of rights, but in abandoning the ground of moral duty it provides no rational basis for anyone to respect the rights of others or to demand of others respect for one's own rights. Rights without duties are meaningless. Where moral truth as the ground of duties is thrown overboard, the language of rights is so much idle chatter fit only for Hollywood cocktail parties and faculty lounges.

Hadley Arkes, the great contemporary theorist of natural rights, has observed in relation to the movement for unfettered abortion that those who demand liberation from the moral law have talked themselves out of the moral premises of their own rights and liberties. If freedom is to be honored and respected, it must be because human freedom is what is required by the laws of nature and nature's God; it cannot be because there are no laws of nature and there is no God.

The Danger of License

But counterfeit freedom poses greater dangers still. As our founders warned, a people given over to license will be incapable of sustaining republican government. For republican government – government by the people – requires a people who are prepared to take responsibility for the common good, including the preservation of the conditions of liberty.

Listen again to President Fairfield, speaking words at that ceremony on July 4, 1853, that are, if anything, still more urgent today:

Unrestrained freedom is anarchy. Restrained only by force and arms, is despotism; self-restrained is Republicanism. Wherever there is wanted the intelligence and virtue requisite for [self-restraint], Republicanism expires.

Slaves to appetite and passion, wanting in the understanding and virtue requisite for self-government, will surely lose it. They will look not to themselves but to government to provide for the satisfaction of their desires. Where counterfeit freedom prevails, the republican principle of limited government is inevitably sacrificed as people surrender personal and, ultimately, political liberty to whatever power promises to protect them from predation and supply the appeasement of their appetites. People are reduced from citizens to subjects to slaves. They trade their birthright of freedom for a mess of pottage. Yet, so long as the big-government-provided pottage functions as a suitable narcotic, they imagine themselves free.

At the same time, the want of virtue creates a counterfeit idea of equality that parallels the counterfeit conception of freedom. True equality – equality under the law, equality of opportunity – is displaced by the demand for equality of results, as envy, like every other passion, commands requital. Distinctions, grounded in such intrinsically retributive ideas as personal merit, are cast aside.

Ultimately, the counterfeit of freedom is a counterfeit because its view of the nature, dignity and destiny of man is a false view. Men and women are not mere bundles of appetites. Our destiny is not to be, as David Hume supposed, slaves of our passions – “rational” only in the purely instrumental sense of being capable of employing our intellectual powers to, in Thomas Hobbes's words, “range abroad and find the way to the things desired.” On the contrary: Men and women, made in the very image and likeness of the Divine Ruler of the Universe, are possessors of an intelligence more profound, and, correspondingly, a freedom more God-like, than that.

We are, to be sure, creatures, and fallen creatures to boot; dust of the earth; sinners every one. Yet the divine image – the icon of God Himself – is not destroyed. And commensurate with the dignity of creatures fashioned in God's image, we are indeed, as the Declaration of Independence says, “endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable rights.” Freedom – true freedom – is, as

President Bush recently had occasion to remind us, God's gift to mankind. The self-government that is the right of free men and women is truly a sacred trust.

President Fairfield said one thing on that day in 1853 that we cannot, alas, say today. Near the end of his address, he declared that "our educational establishments ever have been the faithful allies and firm supporters of all that is ennobling in our free institutions." Tragically, the legacy of our educational establishments in the twentieth century has been altogether different, and very much worse.

Yet at some small number of colleges, Hillsdale their leader, the flame has not been extinguished. That flame has been "nurtured and guarded with a sleepless vigilance" on this campus, as President Fairfield prayed on that day in 1853 that it would be everywhere. You, distinguished graduates, are among the fortunate legatees of that sleepless vigilance on these grounds. It is by that carefully tended flame that your minds have been illumined to understand the nature and foundations of freedom and the responsibilities of republican government.

I say to you today: Keep the flame alive. Hand it on, glowing even more brightly, to your children and your children's children. March forward with the flame aloft into your chosen fields of business, law, medicine and the sciences, education, government, journalism, music and the arts. Do not hide your light under a bushel. As sons and daughters of Hillsdale, be living Statues of Liberty boldly illuminating the landscape of freedom for all whose lives you touch.