



Hillsdale's Mission and the Politics of Freedom

[Larry P. Arnn](#)

President, Hillsdale College

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Hillsdale is often called a conservative college, and in an important sense it is, although it is not a label we regard as fundamental. The word “conservative” is referential, meaningless without a reference to what one wishes to conserve. No one thinks that everything should be conserved. A murder occurred in the first family of the Bible. We do not wish to conserve murder, but rather its condemnation. And some of the most important things to conserve today had their origins in revolution. Socratic philosophy marked a radical departure from tradition. So did Judaism and Christianity. So did the American Founding. These revolutions were opposed by the conservatives of their day, but they are the sources of our philosophic, religious, and political inheritance.

Hillsdale is also sometimes charged by its enemies—gaining enemies is a downside of becoming prominent—as narrowly partisan and a factory of activism. This is simply false. Anyone who visits our campus in Michigan or our satellite campus in Washington, D.C.—or for that matter any of the Hillsdale-affiliated K-12 schools around the country—will discover an atmosphere of serious learning, not of activism. We are the opposite of activist in that we believe that knowing is higher than doing. To act well, one needs knowledge, which comes of learning. We do not encourage our students to become activist either, especially while they are students. I have recently had a contentious exchange in *The Wall Street Journal* with a free speech group that criticizes Hillsdale for requiring its students to conduct themselves in a civil manner, conducive to learning, rather than in the activist and partisan manner we see roiling many other campuses these days.

That said, as I will explain, liberal education itself has become politically controversial in our time, drawing Hillsdale into politics broadly speaking. And Hillsdale has always been broadly partisan on behalf of freedom. Indeed we are required by the College's charter document, written in 1844, to offer “sound learning” of the kind needed to preserve the blessings of “civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety in the land.” In the early decades of Hillsdale's history, that meant opposing slavery. In recent decades, it has meant opposing the centralization of comprehensive power that corrodes our Constitution and undermines our American way of life. One learns in the classics and in the modern literature of totalitarianism that despotic rulers suppress the independent study of things that look beyond the commands of those rulers.

Centralization

America's Founders set out to build a government entirely upon the will of the great body of the people. This had never been done before. And they set out to accomplish this across a great continent—George Washington's army was strikingly called the *Continental Army*—despite the prevailing idea at the time that popular governments could only work in small areas. They succeeded in doing both these things, and the way they succeeded is contained in the American Constitution, the longest living and the greatest constitution ever written.

Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution contains 18 paragraphs that enumerate the powers of Congress. Seven of these have to do with national defense, and one with piracy. The rest, save one, mostly have to do with commerce—weights and measures, currency, unimpeded trade between the states, post offices and post roads. The last power has to do with the federal government's authority over the District of Columbia. Other powers were reserved to the states and localities.

In *Federalist* 63, James Madison writes proudly of the fact that ours will be the first purely representative government. This doesn't just mean that instead of a king being sovereign, as in England, we would elect our rulers. It means that no one inside the government—none of the people carrying on the activities of the government—would be sovereign. The sovereign would be located outside the government. As Abraham Lincoln would later put it, the constitutional majority is the only true sovereign of a free people. All powers are to be delegated from the society to the government.

A diagram of this system would consist of a large circle representing American society. Inside that large circle, government at all levels would be represented by a much smaller circle, about one-tenth the size in terms of gross domestic product. This smaller circle would be divided then into parts. It would be divided vertically with the federal government on one side and states on the other—that's federalism—and the federal side would be divided horizontally into the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. It was a brilliant and novel system for gathering authority to a national center for limited national purposes and distributing all other authority outwards. And it worked for a very long time.

Our system today looks radically different. The circle representing the public sector has grown at an increasing rate for many decades, and in terms of gross domestic product it now takes up over half the space in the larger circle. The divisions in the smaller circle, designed to keep it from growing, have been largely erased. In particular, the separation of powers has been neutralized by the rise of a fourth branch of government, the permanent and unelected bureaucracy or administrative state, which tends to subsume all three powers. This is not to say that the people who work in this administrative state are worse people than the ordinary. Probably they are not. But they are actuated by a common interest, and their accountability to the people for whom they make rules is so indirect as to be almost nonexistent. In any case, the resulting centralization of comprehensive power, all at the expense of the private sector, poses a serious threat to the sovereignty of the people.

To see how serious the threat, consider an important fact about our Constitution that calls increasingly for our attention—the fact that the electoral process is the sole constitutional means by which the American people can control the government. To protect the electoral process, the Founders set it up in a decentralized way. Regarding the election of the president, for instance, the Constitution says that state legislatures—not Congress, and not judges or governors—will devise the manner of choosing the electors for president in each state. This is at the heart of the controversy over the last presidential

election, in which several governors and judges, using Covid as their justification, changed election laws and processes without consulting the state legislatures. It is impossible, in this light, to swallow whole the claim that the 2020 election was perfectly fair and aboveboard, although the establishment media is entirely untroubled by it.

Friends of popular government, of whatever party, should all be very troubled. Winston Churchill spoke beautifully of the greatness of Britain residing in “the little man, walking into the little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper” to decide the fate of the nation. Increasingly in America today, the man in the booth is no longer alone. It is not even any longer his initiative that causes him to vote. In many select areas, more often than not, somebody he doesn’t know mails him a ballot or knocks on his door with a ballot. That in itself is an important step toward the centralization and corruption of a process we simply cannot allow to be lost.

One of the most beautiful laws ever passed was the Homestead Act, signed by President Lincoln in 1862. It consisted of only 1,400 words, and it gave away ten percent of the land area of the United States to unknown people who would never be entitled to vote for anybody serving in the Congress that passed the law. Is it imaginable that the Russian Czar at the time, who in principle owned every inch of Russia, would have acted in such a way? Or the King of England, who in principle had approval power even over private lands in his realm? No. But it is hardly more imaginable that Congress or most of our state legislatures would act in such a way today. The force of centralization has come to seem inexorable. But it should be our highest political priority to reverse it.

Two Philosophic Ideas

What underlies the movement toward centralization and away from the constitutional system that placed sovereignty in the hands of the people and left them free to live their lives? It is the rise to dominance of a new philosophic idea.

The older philosophic idea, the idea that informs the Constitution, was described beautifully by Aristotle. It is the idea that human beings are fallen creatures, and yet partake of the divine. Human passions are strong and can lead us astray, but we are also capable of reason. We are born with knowledge of the good and the capacity to make choices or judgments for good or ill. We feel the pressures of our needs, of pains and pleasures, yet something outside these pressures in the human soul—some call it conscience—asks us if our intentions or actions are right or wrong. And it is through this process that each of us makes ourselves into what we are.

The new philosophic idea, introduced by Machiavelli and others, rejected the older idea of unchanging human nature and even nature in general. It denied the existence of objective truth and posited that everything is malleable. If something doesn’t seem good and yet you want to do it, you should do it and call it good. If something causes you pain, it can be fixed. Working hard enough, we can change anything and everything. There are no natural limits or boundaries. The central question in the older philosophic tradition is, “What is the good?” The central question in modern philosophy is, “How do you get it done?” And if you ask, “Get what done?” the answer is, “Whatever you want.”

This new philosophic idea becomes especially dangerous when combined with the power of modern technology. The word “science” comes from a Latin word meaning to see or gaze upon. The word “technology” comes from a Greek word meaning art. Technology means *making* something, as opposed

to *seeing* something. It gives man the ability to get things done, even if it requires overcoming nature. Think of the limitation imposed by the fact that God created human beings male and female, and of the current technological, pharmaceutical, and surgical attempts to overcome biology and create new genders. Or think of the power to manipulate our thoughts and actions wielded today by the large technology companies collectively known as Big Tech. The closer we look at what these companies are doing—think of the “Twitter Files” released over the past year—the more it is clear that they are not using their power on behalf of human freedom, but on behalf of the centralized administrative state.

We live in serious times. It is not unthinkable that a totalitarian force could descend on us—that the world we know could collapse, never to return, as it did for so many in the last century during the period of the two world wars. What might it look like if that happens? In the course I teach on the literature of totalitarianism, two of the books we read are George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Orwell’s book is about the cruel side of totalitarianism—its most famous line conjures the image of the future as a boot stamping on a human face forever. We see hints of this today. Have you noticed how the FBI has taken to arresting people who are not dangerous and have no criminal record in the middle of the night and with the same force as if its agents were assaulting a heavily armed compound? Huxley, by contrast, presents a kinder and gentler version of totalitarianism—one in which technology and drugs are used to give enslaved people the illusion of happiness. In a letter to Orwell, Huxley predicted that

the world’s rulers will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience.

We see hints of this today as well. In many areas of the country there seem to be more cannabis stores than stores of any other kind. In many places where churches were shuttered during the pandemic, these cannabis stores were allowed to conduct business as usual.

Abolition of Man?

C.S. Lewis wrote a short and very great book called *The Abolition of Man* that describes the destructive character of the new philosophic idea I have described. The book begins by criticizing an English schoolbook written for young children. The schoolbook recounts a well-known story about the poet Samuel Coleridge at a waterfall. Coleridge heard one tourist call the waterfall “pretty” and another call it “sublime,” and he sided with the second tourist—the view of the waterfall was *sublime*, he said, meaning majestic and of great spiritual worth. According to the author of the schoolbook, however, Coleridge’s judgment simply reflected his “feelings” about the waterfall, because truth is subjective. Taking this story as his starting point, Lewis goes on to show that if the idea that there is no objective truth becomes dominant, it will lead to an abolition of man. Because how is man different from the beasts if he lacks the divine spark—the ability of reason to make judgments about what is beautiful and what is not and about what is right and what is wrong?

Other voices today warn us of a technological abolition of man that will result if we are careless about the rise of artificial intelligence. This technology can be useful, but human intelligence must control it. Government’s use of it must be monitored and controlled as well. China is famously using facial recognition and other AI technologies to create a total surveillance state. There is little doubt there are people in our government thinking along the same lines. In East Germany during the Cold War, it is said

that one person in six was connected to the Stasi, the East German equivalent of the Soviet KGB. Governments today don't need agents and spies. They can employ algorithms and AI to accomplish even greater levels of control.

The good news is that human beings, by their nature, don't like tyranny. That is why, as Aristotle explains in Book Five of his *Politics*, tyrants must infantilize their people to maintain their hold. We are seeing uprisings of parents in our country these days. They are angry that schools are dividing their children into groups labeled "oppressed" and "oppressors" according to their skin color. They are angry that the schools are encouraging their children to believe they are a different sex than their biology dictates. Parents are pushing back because parents love their children. That is nature. Nature can be tortured and otherwise set upon, but it cannot be overcome in the end.

The main reason we can be sure that totalitarian control cannot be successful in the end is that it would violate a fact that undergirds the entire universe. Mankind will never have it within his power to make an algorithm that emulates the knowledge of God. It won't work. I am told by AI experts who teach at the College that those of us who live another five years are going to encounter upright artificial beings who are going to talk to us and who are going to have better memories than we do and who will know everything about us individually. But there is a difference between what those beings are doing and saying and what occurs in the rational human soul. And to understand what the difference is, we're going to have to go on giving people educations.

Next year we will have been doing that at Hillsdale College for 180 years. Integral to the teaching and learning at Hillsdale is the older philosophic idea, which is now under assault by the newer idea. The Constitution, informed by the old idea of unchanging human nature and natural law, is friendly toward (and even dependent on) precisely the kind of education we offer. The centralized comprehensive form of government that seeks to destroy and replace the Constitution, by contrast, is threatened by liberal education. Unlike very many institutions of higher learning in our country, Hillsdale has not accommodated itself to that new form of government. Hillsdale is thus caught up in the great political controversy of our time and has no choice but to stand for the side of freedom and limited government. This explains, for instance, why the College sends this newsletter to six-and-a-half million households and businesses. It is partly a matter of self-preservation—the conservation of the activity of liberal learning. It is also a matter of love: we are teachers, and we mean to keep teaching.

All the while Hillsdale's core activity remains unchanged. The job before us is to make ourselves and our students into excellent human beings. That is an activity of joy, and it will make us stronger against any storm.