

Cultural Decline, Higher Education and the Internet

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Richard J. Bishirjian, President, Yorktown University

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The hallmark of our times is technological progress and cultural and civilizational decline. The decline of the civilization of the West and American culture has been steep, but progress in technology has been equally steep. Russell Nieli's account of the history of early college education in America brought home the effect of Darwin's work on American colleges after the Civil War. Colleges that had a Protestant Christian focus lost that focus and became increasingly secular.

Science plays a large part in cultural decline of America and loss of faith, but so also "religion" plays a role. Wilfred Cantwell Smith distinguishes between "religion" and "faith" in this way: "...the concern of the religious man is with God; the concern of the observer is with religion." "...it is not entirely foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept 'religion' is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself."¹ America's cultural decline may be attributed to distance between religious experience and propositional reasoning by which traditional "religion" is made into an object. Late medieval Scholasticism played a role in distancing experience and faith from religion as do modern secular political religions. The consequences are enormous.

Not so long ago--when we were children--we learned that God chose to punish mankind for its evil ways and He sent a flood to destroy the world. After the flood, God gave the survivors--Noah and all the creatures he could save--a symbol of His promise never again to send another flood that destroyed the world.

As children we were taught that God intervenes in history.

As adults we were taught that the rainbow is the effect of light waves that bend when passing through drops of water.

Understanding refraction of light is technological progress, but, until recently, most Americans believed the theory of refracted light *simultaneously* with faith in God's intervention in history.

The subject of cultural decline is far too large to focus upon here and a doctrinal analysis is not what I propose, nor what I was trained to do. However, I think that most of us attending this meeting have been shaped by common experiences that we may describe as "religious."

Ask yourself if you have experienced that your life has been guided.

¹ *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* (Oxford, Eng., 1998). New York, 1964, 22.

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Have you experienced hope when there was little evidence on which to base that hope?

Have you a sense of an ending and of a beginning that are not random?

Do you sense that there is justice in itself though too often the world is unjust?

Do you intuitively understand the truth in Aristotle's observation that "Existence is good to the good man."

Do you affirm Socrates' maxim, "It is better to suffer an injustice than to inflict one"?

That commonly shared experience shapes the West's understanding of human mortality, our obligations to others and the wisdom literature that shaped the culture of the West. Modern higher education all too often ignores or denies that experience. The results have been disastrous.

Where, then, does the Internet fit into this? The Internet is a technology—a good one—but it is a mere instrument, a means to an end. It can be used in "the pursuit of wisdom" or it can be used to satisfy prurient interests.

Yorktown University was founded to contribute to reform of the ills of a system of education in need of reform. And Yorktown University has demonstrated that it is possible to create an Internet institution, accredit it, and qualify to participate in U.S. Department of Education tuition assistance programs on an investment of less than \$2 million.

The Internet provides a way to create new educational institutions, compete in the education marketplace and take students away from existing colleges and universities. The University of Phoenix and others are doing this and I encourage all of you to consider founding your own Internet-based college or university.

The fundamental reality we confront is that the scholars who dominate higher education today have abdicated their civic responsibility to educate students for citizenship in a nation of self-governing citizens.

Instead of education for citizenship, college students today are offered the freedom to choose any elective that pleases them. Too often those choices are suffused with political ideology.

Yes, I know that there are good teachers in some disciplines that are difficult to politicize—and certainly the physical sciences, business studies, some economics, classics and physical education may be included among the programs least likely to violate the standards of scholarship. But Social Sciences such as Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology and the Humanities such as History, English literature,

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American Studies and Philosophy are too often instruments for indoctrination, irrelevant specialization, and gender or ethnic dogmatism that serves a politically correct agenda.

Reversing that is imperative for the future of American freedom.

Because all of us appreciate the value of civic education, we understand its importance for maintaining a regime of free citizens, and despair at its current condition.

Back when we were young and there was no Ronald Reagan to give us federal jobs, when our cities and states, as today, were controlled by Democrats, when the Republican Party had been routed—as today—in a calamitous defeat, Lyndon Johnson gained total control of the federal government and the American people elected a series of disastrous presidents.

During those bad times many in this room chose postgraduate education as a way to educate ourselves, and create careers that were not dependent on government or the wise guys and liberals who surrounded American Presidents.

Conservatives went to graduate school because that was the best way to figure out why our beloved country was careening toward cultural collapse and to comprehend the folkways of an administrative state that threatened economic and political freedom.

Just read the “Membership Directory” of the Philadelphia Society alphabetically starting with the letter “B.” By my count there are twenty-two academic members and that’s just the “B’s.”

Back then in those bad times, there were many graduate institutions they could choose from: the University of Dallas, Claremont, Indiana University, the University of Washington, Case Western Reserve, Catholic University, University of Pennsylvania, UCLA, Notre Dame, the London School of Economics, and other postgraduate institutions.

Back then an eager and vibrant community of aspiring conservative intellectuals could find solace in postgraduate studies, and aspire to teaching positions in Academe.

We could and did seek out graduate schools that supported Willmoore Kendall, Warren Nutter, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, Michael Oakeshott, George Stigler, James Buchanan, Eric Voegelin, Gerhart Niemeyer, Wilhelm Roepke, Stanly Parry, Donald Treadgold, Stephen Tonsor, Leo Strauss, Mario Pei, Martin Diamond, Henry Manne, Harry Jaffa and the list goes on.

I view this migration to postgraduate studies as a natural counter to the political and intellectual apathy we found in “the greatest generation,” the previous generation who learned to appreciate collective action during the Great Depression and World War II, but mistook collectivism for Americanism.

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At the same time that we sought out scholars to lead us to a better understanding of our predicament—and rejected the political apathy and ignorance of our fathers’ generation—a parallel movement occurred that also rejected their fathers’ ignorance and sought intellectual guides of their own kind.

Shaped by the anti-Vietnam war movement, draft avoidance, a taste for marijuana and LSD, and tribal gathering holes like Haight-Ashbury, Greenwich Village, and Woodstock, a reborn radical Left chose academic careers where they were instructed in the thought of Herbert Marcuse, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other reconstituted Marxists and Postmodern intellectuals who argue that college students are ripe for transforming into “an independent social force” for “auxiliary roles in the revolutionary events of our time.”²

In other words, higher education is seen as an instrument for revolution.

I submit that in too many disciplines our colleges and universities have a significant number of tenured professors who attempt precisely that and engage in indoctrination of students toward revolutionary ends.

Scientific relativism that began with value neutral social science has been transformed into a deepening academic nihilism that now aggressively seeks to re-educate college students to perform roles for “the revolutionary events of our time.”

And when that re-education is complete, some become “community organizers” dedicated to advance the cause of the “oppressed.”

I saw some of those community organizers at work from a distance at UC-Berkeley, Columbia University in 1968, and I saw it first hand during the forced closing down of the London School of Economics in the Lent term of 1969. Thugs marched through classrooms at LSE and compelled Faculty to cease teaching—or else. They were led by Columbia University students who were admitted to the LSE after being expelled from Columbia.

Academe that once was safe haven for progressives and atheists now became safe haven and a launching pad for New Left movements across a spectrum from Marxists, radical feminists, and advocates for Black, Chicano, Women’s and Gender studies.

Today this migration of disaffected ‘60s and ‘70s radicals into Academe is complete.

In Denver, for example, the most affordable state educational institution is Metropolitan State University. There the poorest of the poor may seek an education at a cost of about \$1,500 a semester and earn an undergraduate degree. You might hope that such an institution would focus on the skills necessary to earn a living and become productive members of the Denver community. Instead significant resources are spent on Chicano,

² George Novack, *International Socialist Review*, New York, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 67-79.

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Black and Women's studies and the Faculty aspires to mold Metro State in the image of Colorado University-Boulder.

The result is an industry—call it the knowledge industry—that is hostile territory for students with traditional values, religious faith, respect for authority and a desire to learn the skills necessary to improve their lot in life.

That has ominous ramifications for the civic education of America's educated citizens and gives focus to today's panel topic, "The Pursuit of Wisdom in the Age of the Internet."

By gaining control of the hiring and tenure process, these '60s and '70s radicals have made it extremely difficult for conservative students to find graduate institutions for professional advancement.

If graduate students earn degrees and write dissertations in these subjects today, they find that tenure-track University employment is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.

We have now reached a point that conservatives who aspire to a career of scholarship must disguise their beliefs, suffer through studies controlled by teachers hostile to their traditions and, if lucky, serve in silence in community colleges or backwater four-year institutions until such time as academic tenure is achieved.

That explains why if you see conservatives or Republican politicians who are appointed to serve as president of colleges and universities they are high profile conservative politicians or lobbyists, not conservative scholars with administrative experience.

There are very few conservative academics in the pipeline at America's universities with college teaching *and* administrative experience.

You may also have noticed that the conservative community is now identified by Talk Radio hosts, journalists, and gifted politicians, not the scholars of yore who inspired generations to aspire to careers in Academe.

Today, with no avenue for employment in higher education, our brightest conservative students have chosen *not* to earn postgraduate degrees.

Can you blame them?

Can you give me the names of more than two or three Ph.D. degree programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences—anywhere—where at least three conservative scholars assure fair treatment of young Ph.D. candidates?

I know many more aspiring scholars who *quit* graduate school than I do those *in* graduate school.

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An important social fact we should consider is that as conservatives grew in power, as conservatives became more successful politically, and conservative academics were excluded from the Academy, the leavening influence of scholarship was lessened and the conservative community was dumbed-down.

Political success and the shift in our attention from principle to power and influence has been disastrous and there is a need for a new commitment to the pursuit of wisdom and true scholarship.

That will not be easy. While we became politically influential—but dumbed down—the left took control of Academe. The result is a higher education landscape of diminished opportunity and ideological uniformity.

I regret to inform you that we conservatives, and the American nation, are in very grave danger unless we can break the domination of the Academy by the ideologues, radicals, rascals, poseurs, feminists and America-haters who populate its ranks, dominate its academic departments and control important Search Committees.

First, let me observe that education is a form of nurture that is best attained when cultivated by persons of scholarly attainment and commitment to the pursuit of truth.

True education *is not* achieved by reacting against ideologues in the classroom. Few gain in knowledge and wisdom from daily contests of wit with their professors. As a result, too many conservative students have become good debaters, but poor scholars.

Terry Jeffrey, an executive at the Media Research Center, tells me that when he was an undergraduate at Princeton he took a history course from a Professor who began his first class by announcing that he was an atheist and a Marxist. An undergraduate from South Carolina stood up and shouted, “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. I’m out of here.”

Most of us do not have the courage of that young man from South Carolina. Instead we sit in silence while our religious faith, our family values, and respect for America is disdained, day in and day out. For that experience we incur indebtedness of \$20,000, \$40,000 and more.

For too long, too many of us have gained knowledge only by reacting against the ideas of our professors, and too few of us have had the opportunity to study under persons we respect.

That is not the pursuit of wisdom that defines true education.

If it is true that education must offer students something they may affirm how do we justify a system of higher education that offers a little bit of everything, but affirms nothing?

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My colleague on this panel, Christian Kopff, teaches at a state research university where the required curriculum is completion of any course from a list of more than 650 electives.

The University of Colorado at Boulder has some very good to great scholars, but collectively the Faculty of CU can't organize a curriculum of required courses that offer much needed education in American history, government, economics, religion and philosophy. And, so, Colorado University-Boulder abdicates its civic responsibility to educate its students for citizenship.

Why is that? The answer discloses why, in my opinion, reform of existing educational institutions *cannot* be accomplished from within.

CU-Boulder offers a cafeteria style education. If it decided that Coloradans should know something about American history, the history of Western civilization, Colorado history and government, and fundamentals of Economics, the Departments of History, Political Science and Economics would require additional staff to teach required courses in those disciplines. A Department's political clout derives from the number of Faculty in each Department so a vote to require these courses would be a vote to empower Economics, Political Science and History Departments.

If you, a voting member of the CU Faculty were to have reason to mistrust your colleagues in those Departments, you would vote "No" when this came to a vote in a Faculty meeting. At the University of North Carolina-Raleigh, a member of the History Department Faculty told me he was the only non-Marxist member of his Department. So, required courses at UNC-Raleigh in the history of Western civilization would be taught from the Marxist perspective. He opposed that.

Even I would vote against such a requirement if that was the case!

Under such deplorable political and academic conditions, attempts to create Centers for Western Civilization are simply forty years too late, opposition is too great and there is no way to protect them from being co-opted once they are established. Once established they will be neutered by the Left or become just another "elective" in the cafeteria.

And the so-called parallel universities, the think tanks and conservative student organizations that employ so many Ph.D.s are becoming less effective. Why use 1950s technologies to import books and guest speakers onto college campuses when today it is possible to go into the education business and compete for students directly?

I must conclude that, for good or ill, we are compelled to start over, create new colleges and universities, and compete for students with the academic Left.

Fortunately, the technology of the Internet has been around for more than twenty years! The first Internet-based institution was founded in 1987 using ARPANET.

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Significantly it was a for-profit corporation and Michael Milken purchased it to create his own Internet-based educational enterprise.

Over the next fifty years—if we have fifty years of freedom to enjoy—we must do like Michael Milken, Randy Best, the Becker Brothers and a handful of others to create new institutions or replace failed ones with technologically rooted Internet colleges and universities.

I'm hopeful that we can retake higher education because by my estimate it costs a mere \$2 million to establish, accredit, and qualify a new Internet-based college, university or graduate school to participate in U.S. government tuition subsidy programs.

If the pursuit of wisdom is to prevail in higher education, we must start new institutions, not waste time attempting to reform ones that have gone bad.

If you and I fail to do that, we will endure generations of barbarism, centralization of power, greater expansion of the administrative state, more freakish election outcomes, more failed Presidents of the United States and loss of our basic freedoms. One step more toward this abyss and we will hear the words that Alexandr Solzhenitsyn heard: "Hands behind your back."