

Comments of
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“Lincoln’s Unfinished Work: The Morrill Act and the Future of Higher
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Chancellor Herman, President McPherson, Director Mackevich, Professor
Burton:

Perspective is often the most difficult thing to bring to events and
circumstances. As the chairman of the National Endowment for the
Humanities, I have been asked to address the role of the humanities in the
context of our history and the challenges in higher education today.

At issue are events of the past and circumstances of the moment. So let me
posit a hypothetical question.

What would happen if a great country found itself in a traumatic war in
which a profound cultural division existed and both sides cited religious
convictions as a rationalization for their cause? What if the smaller side so
successfully employed asymmetric tactics that the top military commander
of the great power requested that his president supply him an additional
50,000 troops? How should the president of the great power respond when
in addition to being faced with a rising human and family toll associated
with war, the infrastructure in his country was deteriorating, social discord
was heightening, and remarkable social equity and educational opportunity
issues were mounting?

As you might suspect, we have a model. On July 2nd, 1862, Abraham
Lincoln telegraphed General McClellan that his troop request was “absurd.”
On the same day, he signed the Transcontinental Railway Act extending
railroads to the Pacific Ocean, approved a law banning polygamy in Utah,

and to prove a president can skip rope and chew gum at the same time, he affixed his signature to the greatest expansion of educational opportunity in American history: the Morrill Act.

That law in its original is now currently on display here at the Krannert Art Museum which is the first time to my knowledge that an art museum has found a legislative product to be considered an item of beauty. While art criticism is not my field, or more precisely, is everybody's province, no one should doubt the judgment of Krannert's curators. A book-end to the G.I. Bill, the Morrill Act is a Statute of Opportunity, a collaborative ink-on-paper work of art that gleams brightly on the book shelf of American history.

One of the lessons of history is about history. To wit: historical reasoning is always instructive but the past never provides precise parallels to current events. People differ. Settings change. For instance, thoughtful minds throughout Europe groped for decades with the question of why World War I occurred. Most came to the judgment that the European balance of power system was too inflexible. The assassination of a minor archduke should not have triggered trench warfare and the loss of so many lives.

Historical assessments of the causes of World War II result in a totally different set of conclusions. Chamberlain and others appear intellectually and perhaps even morally derelict in advancing policies that have come to be considered appeasement. Too much inflexibility helped lead to the first world war; too much flexibility helped precipitate the second.

I note these contrasting models of failed statecraft simply to underscore that it would be a mistake to assume that the judgmental quandary for Barack Obama is the same today as it was for Abraham Lincoln in 1862. All wars have similarities to prior conflicts, but military analogies are especially frail due to the mixture of emotion and pride and perceived social or national interest involved and the unforeseen consequences that use of force invariably causes.

St. Paul warned early Christians to be cautious of assuming certitude of judgment because we all see through a glass "darkly." Faith may be absolute but applying faith-based judgments to human endeavors is inevitably humbling. Likewise, history is tangible to the degree that there is a finality to events. But history's lessons can be quite murky. Clarity is

elusive. Indeed, history often remains more controversial than current events.

In today's circumstance, the only certainty is that our president has inherited a panoply of challenges, some beyond American capacity to influence, and we can only hope, and if so inclined, pray that the best minds in government think through and arrive at a policy that causes a constructive outcome.

As a representative of an agency dedicated to advancement of the humanities, I do not presume to advise on foreign policy. But despite the traumas of war and the economy, I am obligated to raise the question of whether America errs if it shortchanges the humanities. Here, I am convinced, there is much to be learned from Lincoln.

At issue in the mid-19th Century was the question of geographic and class as well as agricultural and engineering opportunity. Was education to be the disproportionate province of the well-to-do and those living on or near the East coast?

The answer that Lincoln embraced in the middle of war was that land should be set aside in each state for the purpose of establishing a new kind of educational institution. The goal, stated in the legislation, was to "promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life," in other words, to create new opportunities for people who might otherwise not have access to higher education.

Some of you may have watched the recent documentary on America's National Parks by Ken Burns, a filmmaker whose work has from time to time been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. You may recall that he poignantly labeled the National Parks "America's Best Idea," but surely Lincoln's decision to spur the creation of land-grant universities is a credible rival for the "best idea" title.

Lincoln on occasion employed the metaphor "the race of life" and argued that we should all have equal privileges in this race. Prior to running for president, he told the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society that book-learning is the critical leveler. "A capacity, and taste, for reading," he said, "gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others. It is the key, or one of the keys to the already solved problems. And...gives a relish, and facility, for successfully pursuing the unsolved ones." He went on to

say that “education – cultivated thought -- ...combined...with ‘thorough’ work... conforms to what must occur in a world less inclined to wars, and more devoted to the arts of peace...”

What are the consequences of Lincoln’s commitment to invest in education at a time of national peril? Who are these non-coastal people who have embellished America due in no small measure to their association with land-grant universities?

Some are farmers who garnered the knowledge to feed a domestic and international population. Some are engineers; some are entrepreneurs; some are writers; some are artists.

One, a professor here at Illinois, John Bardeen, is considered the co-inventor of one of the three great inventions of the last century – the transistor. Another, John Vincent Atanasoff, a math professor at Iowa State University, was responsible for the second great invention of the century -- the digital computer. And a Missouri-born graduate of this impressive institution, Jack Kilby, is considered with an Iowa-born physicist, Robert Noyce, to be the co-inventor of the third great invention of the century, the microchip.

Another Iowan, Norman Borlaug, received the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for genetic scholarship that decisively helped alleviate what might have been a Malthusian debacle. Borlaug was educated at the University of Minnesota, which was founded in 1851, forced to close due to financial problems during the civil war, and reopened in 1867 as a land-grant institution.

Whose work, in Lincoln’s terms, could have been more emblematic of advancing “the art of peace” than these heartland giants of “cultivated thought” and “thorough” work?

As you probably have gathered, I am an unabashed Midwestern chauvinist, but I do acknowledge that the contributions of land-grant institutions are not limited to the heartland. Rutgers, which beat out Princeton to become the land-grant institution in New Jersey, is one of the finest state universities in the country. Cornell, which describes its goal as “egalitarian excellence,” has spawned some 40 Nobel laureates. On the West Coast, Cal-Berkeley has a like if not greater number of Nobels and is an international leader in virtually every field of academia. And the aforementioned native son of Missouri, Jack Kilby, and of Iowa, Norman Borlaug, devoted the last years

of their lives to teaching at another premier land-grant university, Texas A&M.

Lincoln's legacy has many dimensions. Two stand out: his decision to prosecute war to democratize a slavery-divided society and his decision to initiate land-grant colleges to democratize access to education.

Today, as in Lincoln's time, we are living in a country that faces profound challenges of identity, security, and equality. Like Lincoln, who was self-educated in the classics, our current president is an individual who has been shaped by his study of history and the humanities. And like Lincoln, this president is committed to expanding access to education and to bringing people together. In an echo of Lincoln, he recently noted that "creativity and a thirst for understanding are the fuel that has fed our nation's success for centuries..."

In coupling "creativity" with a "thirst for understanding," the President implicitly affirms that education is more than mastering numbers and memorizing facts. Knowledge without creativity is a barren state. "Imagination," as Einstein once said, "is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited whereas imagination embraces the entire world." Einstein himself was a living embodiment of the imaginative mind trumping "skill-set" exclusivity. He was considered the greatest physicist of the modern and perhaps any era, but in a math-based science, he was not considered a first-tier mathematician. Instead, he was an unparalleled "imaginist."

I stress this notion because of all the learning disciplines, the humanities do the most to tap and expand the imagination. Literature, art, history, religion and philosophy give meaning to our concepts of justice and goodness, and shape our sense of beauty. Never have they been so important. Thought that has not been imbued with imagination cannot cope with the kind of rapid, unprecedented change we see all around us today.

To fail to study history, to refuse to learn from literature, and to deny the lessons of philosophy are to imprison our thoughts in the here and now. Thus do we magnify the misjudgments of our contemporaries, shutting ourselves off from the wisdom and, likewise, the mistakes of others in the near and ancient past.

Yet for a variety of reasons institutions of higher education are facing difficult times, and within them the humanities are being constrained most of all. Shrinking endowments, budget cuts at state legislatures, and a weakened philanthropic community are taking their toll. In addition, students are increasingly choosing what might be considered job-centric disciplines and academic administrators are assessing departments as to whether they are profit centers or, at least not too costly.

Fortunately, as many professional schools are recognizing, the best in many fields have multi-disciplinary backgrounds and are asked to take interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving. It is now almost a norm to offer courses in ethics at business and medical schools. And symbolized by the surprise announcement this week of two Americans winning the Nobel Prize for Economics for applying social science approaches to analyzing market behavior, the social sciences like the natural sciences are increasingly bridging disciplines.

We in the humanities are disappointed that fewer students are gravitating to English and history and philosophy as majors. Nevertheless, the bigger challenge may be to the academy itself. The issue is priorities: whether to invest in the future or mire ourselves in problems of the present. Complicating matters is the possibility that America may be in the midst of a macro-economic jolt – a 20% or more devaluation of assets relative to prior values and a comparable adjustment relative to the rest of the world.

By background, in the 1980s the value of publicly traded stocks in the United States mushroomed, and in the 1990s home values in much of the country doubled. In this century both the stock market and home values have weakened, and our standing and reputation in the world have been undercut by a controversial foreign policy. What this means is that in a consumerist society, government as well as the American family borrowed against chimerical assets and false expectations of job growth and enhanced family income. In a societal correction, the mantra of the coming decade could be a prudential concentration on management of debt at every governmental level and, most importantly, within the American family.

There is fashionable economic consensus emerging that to right a perceived imbalance America needs to save more and countries like China need to spend more. At the risk of hyperbole, some are even suggesting America may be entering a post-consumerist era and citizens by choice or necessity

may begin to embrace other priorities. The implication of this cultural shift might not be all bad. What if going to the mall was replaced with visits to museums and libraries? What contributes more to a satisfying life – a closet full of shoes or a chance to reflect, alone or in a group, on the products of human creativity?

The reason the federal government advanced a stimulus spending approach this last year was to pick up the economic slack caused by out-of-work citizens and families who started to buy less and save more. The bad news is that dealing with greater governmental debt will be an extra burden to future taxpayers. The good news has two compensating dimensions. Government intervention has helped stabilize the economy and avert a cyclonic slide downward and, largely unnoted, a new depression-averting model has been established where the Federal Reserve, rather than a Treasury dependent on specific Congressional appropriations, has been the principal infuser of capital into the economy. Unlike traditional Keynesian models of fiscal stimulus, the Federal Reserve's capital infusions will in large measure be paid back, with interest.

Where does higher education stand in this challenging macro-economic circumstance? It is hard to think anything except that an investment in the American people – i.e., education – has never been more important. At the same time, it is difficult to be overly optimistic that universities can rely on significant new income streams from government. In an economic downturn, demands for government services increase at the same time jobs and government income decrease. Particularly strapped are state governments where substantial social services obligations are posited.

The big picture is that over the last generation the percentage of costs of public universities borne by state legislatures has declined from approximately a third to less than half this figure. The decrease in relative support is caused by the labor-intensive nature of education where costs have increased above inflation rates and the fact that state governments have been required to devote vastly greater resources to Medicaid. In addition, by choice, most legislatures have generally begun to favor k-12 education expenditures to higher education obligations.

Given the budgetary competition at the state level, it could be that the most important phenomenon for public universities to follow is whether change or lack of change in federal health care policies reduces or increases the health

care obligations of state governments and whether approaches taken in the future will have the effect of curbing or spurring health care costs in society at large.

Likewise, much desired federal initiatives in a host of areas, including education, are likely to be affected by Congressional budget realities, though we are fortunate that the President has clearly affirmed a pro-education, pro-scientific research agenda and designated truly impressive individuals to head the Departments of Education and Energy.

Despite and in some ways because of the challenging economic setting, the case for investing anew in higher education and thus our own citizens is compelling, particularly if institutions re-energize the humanities as they continue to propel technology and the sciences.

Citizens, after all, need to apply perspective and judgment to the issues they face in their families and communities and we as a country confront in the world. Without reference to the guideposts of the humanities, society loses its soul. It risks becoming rudderless in a sea of historical change.

Lincoln understood this. So must we.

Thank you.