

On the issue of defending Western Civilization and its place in the curriculum of America's schools, one statement seems to have emerged from among several others as a succinct defense of a core of culture for the US, and that is the speech by Dean Donald Kagan welcoming the class of 1994 to the Yale College campus on September 1, 1990. Reprinted from Commentary, January 1991, by permission; all rights reserved.

THE ROLE OF THE WEST

By Donald Kagan

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 1994, parents, and friends, greetings and welcome to Yale. To a greater degree than ever before this class is made up of a sampling, not of Connecticut, not of New England, not even of North America, but of all the continents of the world. As I stood a year ago greeting the Class of 1993 I was thrilled by how much Yale and America have been enriched in the three centuries since its foundation by the presence and the contribution of the many racial and ethnic groups rarely if ever represented in Yale's early years. The greater diversity among our faculty and student body, as in the American people at large, is a source of strength and it should be a source of pride as well.

But ethnic and racial diversity is not without its problems. Few governments and societies have been able to combine diversity with internal peace, harmony, freedom, and the unity required to achieve these goals. Perhaps the greatest success in ancient times was achieved by the Roman Empire, which absorbed a wide variety of peoples under a single government, generally tolerated cultural diversity, and gradually granted to all Roman citizenship, the rule of law, and equality before the law. But the Romans had imposed their rule over independent nations by force and maintained peace and order by its threat. From the nations whose cultures they tolerated they did not create a single people; they did not and they could not rely on the voluntary and enthusiastic participation in government and society of a unified population, as a modern democratic republic must.

From the Middle Ages until its collapse in 1918, the Hapsburg Empire did a remarkable job of bringing a great variety of different ethnic groups into the main stream of government and society, but it never succeeded in dissolving the distinct identities of the different groups, living together in separate communities, speaking their native languages, competing and quarreling with one another, and finally hostile to the dominant ethnic groups. The destruction of the Hapsburg Empire and its dissolution into smaller units did not end ethnic dissension, which threatens the survival of such successor states as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

In our time nationalism and ethnicity have

emerged as immensely powerful forces, for good, but also for evil. Optimistic hopes for a diminution of differences among peoples and for a movement toward the unity of all mankind have been dashed as national and ethnic hostilities have played a major part in bringing on two terrible world wars. Even today they endanger the integrity of the Soviet Union and threaten peace both in Europe and in Africa. They have brought interethnic slaughter to Nigeria and all but destroyed the beautiful land of Lebanon.

From its origins the United States of America has faced a new challenge and opportunity. Its early settlers from the old world were somewhat diverse but had much in common. Most were British, spoke English, and practiced some form of Protestant Christianity. Before long, however, people of many different ethnic, religious, and national origins arrived with different cultural traditions, speaking various languages. Except for the slaves brought from Africa, most came voluntarily, as families and individuals, usually eager to satisfy desires that could not be met in their former homelands. They swiftly became citizens and, within a generation or so, Americans. In our own time finally, after too long a delay, African-Americans also have achieved freedom, equality before the law, and full citizenship. People of different origins live side by side, often in ethnic communities, but never in enclaves of the country separated from other such conclaves. Although some inherit greater advantages than others, all are equal before the law, which does not recognize ethnic or other groups but only individuals. Each person is free to maintain old cultural practices, abandon them for ones found outside his ethnic group, or to create some mixture or combination.

Our country is not a nation like most others. "Nation" comes from the Latin word for birth: a nation is a group of people of common ancestry, a breed. Chinese, Frenchmen, and Swedes feel a bond that ties them to their compatriots as to a greatly extended family and provides the unity and commitment they need. But Americans do not share a common ancestry and a common blood. They and their forebears come from every corner of the earth. What they have in common and what brings them

together is a system of laws and beliefs that shaped the establishment of the country, a system developed within the context of Western Civilization. It should be obvious, then, that all Americans need to learn about that civilization if we are to understand our country's origins, and share in its heritage, purposes, and character.

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At present, however, the study of Western Civilization in our schools and colleges is under heavy attack. We are told that we should not give a privileged place in the curriculum to the great works of its history and literature. At the extremes of this onslaught the civilization itself, and therefore its study, is attacked because of its history of slavery, imperialism, racial prejudice, addiction to war, its exclusion of women and people not of the white race from its rights and privileges. Some criticize its study as narrow, limiting, arrogant, and discriminatory, asserting that it has little or no value for those of different cultural origins. Others concede the value of the Western heritage but regard it as only one among many, all of which have equal claim to our attention. These attacks are unsound. It is both right and necessary to place Western Civilization and the culture to which it has given rise at the center of our studies, and we fail to do so at the peril of our students, our country, and of the hopes for a democratic, liberal society emerging throughout the world today.

In response to those who claim that Western culture is relevant only to a limited group, it is enough to quote W.E.B. DuBois, the African-American intellectual political leader, writing at the turn of the century in a Jim Crow America: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I walk arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil." For him the wisdom of the West's great writers was valuable for all, and he would not allow himself or others to be deprived of it because of the accident of race. Such was and is the view of the millions of people of both genders and every ethnic group who have personally experienced the value and significance of the Western heritage.

The assault on the character of Western

Civilization badly distorts history. Its flaws are real enough, but they are common to almost all the civilizations known on any continent at any time in human history. What is remarkable about the Western heritage and what makes it essential is the important ways in which it has departed from the common experience. More than any other it has asserted the claims of the individual against those of the state, limiting its power and creating a realm of privacy into which it cannot penetrate. By means of the philosophical, scientific, agricultural and industrial revolutions that have taken place in the West, human beings have been able to produce and multiply the things needed for life so as to make survival and prosperity possible for ever-increasing numbers, without rapacious wars and at a level that permits dignity and independence. It is the champion of representative democracy as the normal way for human beings to govern themselves, in place of the different varieties of monarchy, oligarchy, and tyranny that have ruled most of the human race throughout history and rule most of the world today. It has produced the theory and practice of the separation of church from state, thereby protecting each from the other and creating a free and safe place for the individual conscience. At its core is a tolerance and respect for diversity unknown in most cultures. One of its most telling characteristics is its encouragement of criticism of itself and its ways. Only in the West can one imagine a movement to neglect the culture's own heritage in favor of some other. The university itself, a specially sheltered place for such self-examination, is a Western phenomenon only partially assimilated in other cultures.

My claim is that most of the sins and errors of Western Civilization are those of the human race. Its special achievements and values, however, are gifts to all humanity and are widely seen as such around the world today, although its authorship is rarely acknowledged. People everywhere envy not only its science and technology but also its freedom and popular government and the institutions that make them possible. Their roots are to be found uniquely in the experience and ideas of the West. Western culture and institutions are the most powerful paradigm in the world today. As they increasingly become the objects of emulation by peoples everywhere, their study becomes essential for those of all nations who wish to understand their nature and origins. How odd that Americans should choose this moment to declare it irrelevant, unnecessary, and even vicious.

There is, in fact, great need to make the Western heritage the central and common study in American schools, colleges and universities today. Happily, student bodies have grown vastly more diverse. Less happily, students are seeing themselves increasingly as parts of groups, distinct from other groups. They often feel pressure to communicate mainly with others like themselves within the group and to pursue intellectual

interests that are of particular importance to it. The result that threatens is a series of discrete experiences in college, isolated from one another, segregated, and partial. But a liberal education needs to bring about a challenge to the ideas, habits, and attitudes that students bring with them, so that their vision may be broadened, their knowledge expanded, their understanding deepened. That challenge must come from studies that are unfamiliar, sometimes uncomfortably so, and from a wide variety of fellow students from many different backgrounds, holding different opinions, expressing them freely to one another, and exploring them together.

If the students are to educate each other in this way some part of their studies must be in common, and their natural subject is the experience of which our country is the heir and of which it remains an important part. There is, after all, a common culture in our society, itself various, changing, rich with contributions of Americans who come or whose ancestors came from every continent in the world, yet recognizably and unmistakably American. At this moment in history an objective observer would have to say that it derives chiefly from the experience of Western Civilization, and especially from England, whose language and institutions are the most copious springs from which American culture draws its life. I say that without embarrassment, as an immigrant from a tiny country on the fringe of the West, without any connection with the Anglo-Saxon founders of the United States. Our students will be handicapped in their lives after college if they do not have a broad and deep knowledge of the culture in which they live and the roots from which it comes.

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There are implications, too, for our public life. Constitutional government and democracy are not natural blessings; they are far from common in the world today, and they have been terribly rare in the history of the human race. They are the product of some peculiar developments in the history of Western Civilization, and they, too, need to be thoroughly understood by all our citizens if our way of governing ourselves is to continue and flourish. We must all understand how it works, how it came to be, and how hard it is to sustain.

Our country was invented and has grown strong by achieving unity out of diversity while respecting the importance and integrity of the many elements that

make it up. The founders chose as a slogan *e pluribus unum*, which kept a continuing and respected place for the plurality of the various groups that made up the country, but they emphasized the unity which was essential for its well-being. During the revolution that brought us independence, Benjamin Franklin addressed his colleagues, different from one another in so many ways, yet dependent on one another for survival and success, using a serious pun to make his point. He told them they must all hang together or assuredly they would all hang separately. That warning still has meaning for Americans today. As our land becomes more diverse the danger of separation, segregation by ethnic group, mutual suspicion and hostility increases and with it the danger to the national unity which, ironically, is essential to the qualities that attracted its many people to this country. Our colleges and universities have a great responsibility to communicate and affirm the value of our common heritage, even as they question it and continue to broaden it with rich new elements.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 1994, you, too, have important responsibilities. Take pride in your family, and in the culture they and your forbears have brought to our shores. Learn as much as you can about that culture and share it with all of us. Learn as much as you can of what the particular cultures of others have to offer. But most important, do not fail to learn the great traditions that are the special gifts of that Western Civilization which is the main foundation of our university and our country. Do not let our separate heritages draw us apart and build walls between us, but use them to enrich the whole. In that way they may join with our common heritage to teach us, to bring us together as friends, to unite us into a single people seeking common goals, to make a reality of the ideal inherent in the motto *e pluribus unum*.

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