



## Whither the West?

### *Restoring the Study of Western Civilization in Our Universities*

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*The following is a transcript of the speech opening the Western Civilization Summit on June 8, 2015, at the Texas Public Policy Foundation Headquarters.*

Good evening. My name is Tom Lindsay, and I direct the Center for Higher Education here at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, on behalf of which I want to welcome all of you to this event.

The importance of our meeting cannot be overstated. The purpose of our conference is to explore means to restore the required study of Western Civilization in our universities. Now, to assert that such study is an integral part of a genuine education is to presuppose knowledge of the whole of which we assert this study deserves to be a part. This whole is liberal education.

The model for liberal education is what is known as the “Socratic turn.” Liberal education is born of Socrates’ proposition that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates argues that our quest for knowledge of the whole cannot take place in a vacuum. It requires that we simultaneously examine our act of examining—that we study the context in which we pursue discovery. This is why Socrates turned away from the sole study of what today is called the “natural sciences” and toward the “human things,” politics chief among them. In our case, then, the particular study of the foundations of Western Civilization is not mere antiquarianism, nor is it Western triumphalism. Rather, the study of Western Civilization is indispensable to our quest to know ourselves.

It comes as no surprise to this audience that the word “liberal” in “liberal education” has the same root as the word “liberty.” Liberal education is an education for and through liberty. Following Socrates, the highest end of liberal education is the

freedom of the mind; that is, freedom from unexamined assumptions, for example, swings in intellectual fashion, partisan politics, and ideology. Only when illuminated by intellectual freedom can both the possibilities and limitations of political and economic freedom fully disclose themselves. Liberty at its peak is thus identical with the pursuit of truth. But this pursuit, as Socrates’ ultimate fate suggests, is not without danger.

Accordingly, the institutionalization of regimes devoted to intellectual liberty—here, universities—depends on their being situated in a system of political liberty. And political liberty is of course a concept born of Western Civilization. In the American context, the cultivation of free minds simultaneously transcends and depends on the political freedom enshrined in the Constitution. And constitutionalism is of course a concept born of Western Civilization. This dependence of intellectual liberty on political liberty, coupled with the Socratic imperative to “examine our examining,” should, we argue, lead American colleges and universities to require their students to study the foundations of Western civilization.

We argue further that a genuine education, which must include civics, requires, at the least, that we attempt to understand the figures and movements animating Western Civilization as they understood themselves. For example, most of the course of Western Civilization arose well before the rise of social-science positivism, before historical relativism, and before progressivism. Studying Western Civilization on its own terms is the first though not the last requirement of intellectual integrity; because to teach the West only or primarily through the later lenses of relativism and progressivism must force us to plead guilty to the charge of digging up the bones that we ourselves buried.

### Key Points

- According to the U.S. Department of Education, only one in three college students today graduate having taken even one course in American Government.
- Texas should require the study of the Declaration and Constitution in all of its public universities.
- A genuine study of Western Civilization requires that we allow the figures and movements animating our history to speak for themselves.

I've provided here only the briefest introduction to the issues that will be the focus of our discussions tonight and tomorrow. But before we can turn to these discussions, you have need of sustenance. Enjoy your meals, and thank you. ★

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