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Nation(s) Divided?: Opening Convocation Remarks

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Nation(s) Divided?
Opening Convocation Remarks 18 August 2015
Jonathan D. Green

On behalf of the faculty, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Illinois Wesleyan University. This is a remarkable institution and I am thrilled to watch you all embark on a tremendous journey.

This year we are embracing the theme of “Nation(s) Divided?” One of the hallmarks of liberal education is that it creates an environment in which a question or idea can be addressed through a variety of disciplinary lenses and synthesized to be understood holistically. Each year, we select a theme that transcends disciplines forcing us to appreciate how most of the important questions we face need to be addressed from a breadth of perspectives. We will begin this important work with the discussions of the summer reading tomorrow evening.

In preparation for those discussions, you were all invited to submit entries in an essay contest about *The Unlikely Disciple*. The selection committee was delighted by the thoughtfulness and quality of the submissions, so thank you to all who participated. I am pleased to announce the winners:

- Honorable Mention awards go to Emma Marie Haan for her essay, "Between Two Worlds" and Kathryn Anne Halford for her essay, "The Complexity of Balance." Emma and Kathryn please stand up.
- The First Prize goes to Benjamin Alan Zentner for his essay, "Still a Jerk." Benjamin please stand up.

In addition to numerous 3-D events, discussion sessions, and a film series, some of the activities we have planned in connection to this theme for the fall include:

The dedication of our new Multi-Faith Prayer Room next week, A Human Rights Workshop next month focused on incarceration, an Alternative Fall Break addressing poverty and social justice, Kevin Roose, author of the summer reading, *Unlikely Disciple* will be our featured speaker at the President's Convocation two weeks from tomorrow, and the former Vice-President of Egypt, Mohamed ElBaradei will lead a masterclass on our campus next month.

I'm sure a number of you have been wondering about the parade of proud peacocks we appear to be in our academic regalia. I suspect many of you are wondering what the various characteristics of these robes mean.

Our academic regalia are representations of the robes worn in the earliest European universities where the masters, or teachers, gradually converted their monks' robes for use in cold ill-equipped institutions. They serve as symbolic bridges to our

academic past. The dangling box sleeves of today's master's robe represents where early scholars shifted their hands for warmth. The doctoral hoods are an adaptation of shoulder bags in which they carried food and scant supplies.

Some institutions have elected to create their own distinct regalia, for example, President Wilson's robe is unique to the University of Michigan, and when you graduate, you will wear green baccalaureate robes specific to Illinois Wesleyan. Most of our faculty members wear robes from American universities based upon two styles, the designers of which were Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

It might seem odd to you that these two great statesmen who were the principle authors of the two most important documents in our republic's history that aimed to bring a divided people together as one nation were engaged in the designs of academic regalia. This is one of the many reasons the theme of *Nation(s) Divided?* is ideal for you as the newest members of this liberal-arts institution.

Jefferson and Madison were not only the 3rd and 4th presidents of the United States, they were also the 1st and 2nd Rectors of the University of Virginia. The founding fathers of the United States were products of the Enlightenment. They were intellectuals who believed that their political experiment was dependent upon an enlightened populace to succeed.

William Smith was named Provost of the College of Philadelphia (forebear of the University of Pennsylvania) in 1755. He introduced the first systematic course of study and degree program in the colonies. It is fitting that he would serve as the inaugural President of the first college founded in the new United States. It is even more fitting that this institution, Washington College, would be established under the aegis of its namesake. George Washington was a member of the board during the College's early years, stepping down when he accepted the U.S. presidency.

Washington's belief in the critical role education would play in our national development continued throughout his career of public service. The draft of his first inaugural address embraces the foundation of liberal education:

Whenever the opportunity shall be furnished to you as public or as private men, I trust you will not fail to use your best endeavors to improve the education and manners of a people; to accelerate the progress of arts & sciences; to patronize works of genius; to confer rewards for invention of utility; and to cherish institutions favourable to humanity. — G. Washington, Draft of the First Inaugural Address, c. January 1789

In his final annual address to Congress, Washington outlined his dreams for a new nation, calling for the formation of a national university and a national military college:

... the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our country-men by the common education of a portion of our youth from every quarter well deserves attention. The more homogenous our citizens can be made in these particulars the

greater will be our prospect of permanent union; and a primary object of such a national institution should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic what species of knowledge can be equally important and what duty more pressing on its legislature than to patronize a plan for communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country? — G. Washington, Eighth Annual Address, 7 December 1796

Washington was not alone in his patronage of the intellectual future of the republic. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences was established in 1780. Its founders were John Adams, John Hancock, and James Bowdoin. Among the members inducted the following year were Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

The five authors of the Declaration of Independence were public intellectuals of the highest order. Robert Livingston was a distinguished man of letters who amassed a personal library of over 4000 volumes. John Adams, as I just noted, was a founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Roger Sherman was a member of the Yale University faculty and served as the University's treasurer. Benjamin Franklin provided the leadership to create the College of Philadelphia, which became the University of Pennsylvania. Of all his accomplishments, Thomas Jefferson took his greatest pride in having established the University of Virginia.

Other Virginia patriots provided important educational leadership. James Madison and James Monroe were charter members of the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia, and Madison succeeded Jefferson as Rector of the University. Patrick Henry helped to establish the charter of Hampden-Sydney College in January of 1776, making it the last college founded in the colonies. On 5 December of that same year, Phi Beta Kappa was founded at William and Mary.

Like Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin was a man of immense intellectual breadth. He founded the College of Philadelphia in 1749, the same year he published a fascinating outline of the goals and content of the educational experience he hoped its students would receive. The footnotes, which are more extensive than the body of the text, provide evaluations of his proposed content for this curriculum. The pamphlet concludes with the following summary of the goals of such an education:

The Idea of what is true Merit, should also be often presented to Youth, explain'd and impress'd on their Minds, as consisting in an Inclination join'd with an Ability to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family; which Ability is (with the Blessing of God) to be acquir'd or greatly encreas'd by true Learning; and should indeed be the great Aim and End of all Learning. — B. Franklin: Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania (p.30), 1749.

Franklin was also the co-founder of the American Philosophical Society with John Bartram. Early members included George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Rush, and the lesser-known Michael Hillegas who edited the *Declaration of Independence* and served as our nation's first Treasurer. Despite its appearance as

a pantheon of early political and military leaders of an upstart nation, the APS was, and continues to be, an elite assembly of the leading thinkers of the day.

Ours is a nation conceived in intellectual idealism that has been challenged by divisions from its founding to the present. Today we are divided by political ideologies, religion, and a surprising presence of anti-intellectualism even in the seats of government. The visionary leaders who conceived this republic were avid scientists, political theorists, natural historians, and moral philosophers. They were deep thinkers who embodied the best citizenship that is at the heart of liberal learning, and the key to uniting a divided people.

We are gathered at this great university to address many of the same universal questions that our founding fathers faced. You are fortunate because the assembly of scientists, political theorists, natural historians, artists, and moral philosophers with whom you will work on our campus are truly expert guides.

Today it is my pleasure to introduce one of our very best, Professor Linda French, recipient of the 2015 Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.

Dr. French...