

Edward Everett Prize in Oratory
Speech Manuscript – January 24, 2005

Topic: Hillsdale and the American Republic
Speaker: Hans Zeiger

We are the Chargers; our mascot is the Charger. There has been some dispute in recent years as to whether we are to portray that mascot as a horse, an eagle, or a lightning bolt. But there is another symbol that stands at the front of this campus that no one has yet considered, and that is the statue of a Civil War soldier, dedicated “to the memory of our heroic dead who fell in defense of the Union.” Sculpted by Lorado Taft in 1895, it contains the names of the hundreds of members of the Alpha Kappa Phi Literary Society who served in that bloody conflict. This college is distinguished by the apparent fact that a higher percentage of its students served the Union cause than any other non-military college.¹ Five hundred Hillsdale College students volunteered for military service during the Civil War, and many of them sacrificed their lives on the battlefield.²

This morning I will discuss Hillsdale’s contribution to the American Republic during the Civil War and the relevance of that heritage to our own experience at this college. We owe a debt to Professor Arlan Gilbert who has written a detailed account of Hillsdale’s role in the Civil War, entitled *Hillsdale Honor: The Civil War Experience*.

Following the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, Hillsdale students met to discuss their response, and they drafted a resolution “in favor of suppressing rebellion, enforcing the laws, and supporting the Constitution.”³ A 36-foot American flag was hoisted above the main building on campus. Many Hillsdale students joined the Hillsdale County Cavalry Company, while others joined the Fourth Michigan Volunteer Infantry.⁴ Before leaving for battle in June 1861, the Hillsdale soldiers of the Fourth Infantry returned to campus, many for the last time, to participate in a commencement prayer service. As female students pinned red, white, and blue rosettes on the soldiers, the college gave a tremendous ovation. Professor Henry Whipple could not complete his remarks on that occasion because he joined with the rest of Hillsdale in being overcome by emotion.⁵

Sgt. Henry Magee later spoke of standing on the battlefield at Malvern Hill as every man to his right except one was shot. “Then no college boy flinched,” he reflected, “and each held his place, full to the front, on that awful death line, until the battle was won.”⁶ At Gettysburg, 174 out of the 300 soldiers of the Fourth Infantry were killed, wounded, or captured.⁷ Of these sacrifices, the poet Will Carleton, then a student at Hillsdale, wrote:

Now many a form, once blithe and warm,
Lies ‘neath the Southern Sod
And many a soul has reached the goal,
And gone to meet its God.⁸

Sgt. Moses Luce was one of three Hillsdale students to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and he merited that award by rushing into a line of enemy fire to rescue a wounded fellow Hillsdale student.⁹ At an Alpha Kappa Phi reunion at the college chapel, Sgt. Luce offered a toast, “In memory of our noble dead, who left the forum for the field – the pen for the sword – homes, friends and hopes for hardships, struggles and death, to prevent the destruction of our nation and the disgrace of our flag; and who now sleep in their patriot graves.”¹⁰ Some of them were buried at Oak Grove Cemetery down West Street from the campus, where every Decoration Day beginning in 1868 the faculty and students of Hillsdale would march in solemn procession to lay flowers at the graves of the heroes. An arch above the cemetery entrance read, “The Army of Our Dead.”¹¹

A June 1864 editorial in the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* commended Hillsdale College for its courageous representation in the Union cause. The young men of Hillsdale, it said, “have watered with their blood every battlefield of the Republic,” and their patriotic service earned them an honor high above any honor that a college can grant.¹² The American Republic was at stake, and Hillsdale College mustered its deepest reserves of valor to defend it.

This generation of Hillsdale College students is like that generation. The country is deeply divided. This time the issue is not liberty – that is only secondary – the issue is responsibility. Today, the American Republic faces a crisis of ideas and spirit in which cultural nihilism and moral indifference are at war against honor

and duty and justice. The issue is nothing less than our capacity for self-government, and thus for constitutional government.

I visited Ann Arbor during Fall Break last semester. As I approached the University of Michigan campus, I saw the colonnaded portico of the Angell Building looming before me. And on the entablature were the forgotten words of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787: “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” Like the University of Michigan, Hillsdale College was a federal land grant school under the Northwest Ordinance.

Unlike the University of Michigan, Hillsdale College continues to impart “religion, morality, and knowledge.” Unlike most colleges and universities in the nation, Hillsdale clings to unchanging truths that sustain the American Republic.

I met 95-year old Wilma Urfer at a recent campus event. Mrs. Urfer graduated from Hillsdale in the Class of 1931. I asked her what has changed about the college since she was a student when Hillsdale was only half as old as it is now. Only the buildings have changed, she replied. Everything else is remarkably similar.

That could not be said of the University of Michigan, where relativism has supplanted truth in almost every classroom, where confusion has replaced learning. Change can be a good thing, but just as tradition for its own sake can be deadening, so change for its own sake can be maddening. Hillsdale seeks neither tradition nor change exclusively; it seeks to defend a tradition that requires ongoing change. In our time, the thing that must be changed is the American heart and mind, and the thing that must be preserved is the “Judeo-Christian faith and the Greco-Roman culture.”¹³

Because within that heritage of civilization is a body of ideas mightier than ourselves. A Hillsdale student delivered a speech on campus in 1864 in which he said, “Cannon balls are mighty missiles, but ideas in the possession of a skillful writer or when hurled by the logic of an orator are mightier still ... An idea when properly aimed shakes the whole world from center to circumference ... Ideas are the great levers by which the world is moved.”¹⁴ Our battle today is one of ideas – ideas upon which our republic will rise or fall.

Sgt. Magee, who buried his Hillsdale classmates at Malvern Hill, spoke at the dedication of Lorado Taft's statue in 1895. He said that the message of the bronze monument was a reminder of "the simple, old, old lesson of truth and duty."¹⁵

It is most fitting that we should remember the students who sacrificed for liberty and justice in the Civil War by calling ourselves Chargers. But we must not merely call ourselves that; we must study liberty, and we must act upon our faith and our courage.

Virtus Tentamine Gaudet is our college motto: "strength rejoices in the challenge." It is the inscription at the base of our college seal whereupon sabers are crossed to signify our college's struggle in the Civil War.¹⁶ More than that, the clash of sabers – the conflict of ideas and ideals – continues in our own time. Once again the survival of the American Republic depends on those who will volunteer. May we rise like Chargers to the challenge of our generation, always remembering the mighty lesson of truth and duty.

¹ Arlan K. Gilbert. *Hillsdale Honor: The Civil War Experience*. Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 1994, p. xvi

² Gilbert, p. xvi

³ Hillsdale undergraduate resolution, April 19, 1861, quoted in Gilbert, p. 11

⁴ Gilbert, p. 13

⁵ Gilbert, p. 14

⁶ Sgt. Henry Magee, quoted in Gilbert, p. 14

⁷ Gilbert, p. 16

⁸ Will Carleton, quoted in Gilbert, p. 39

⁹ Gilbert, p. 20

¹⁰ Gilbert, p. 65

¹¹ Gilbert, p. 72

¹² *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, June 14, 1865, quoted in Gilbert, p. ii

¹³ Hillsdale College Mission Statement

¹⁴ John C. Patterson, speech to Alpha Kappa Phi, 1864, quoted in Gilbert, p. 65

¹⁵ Gilbert, p. 71

¹⁶ Hillsdale College. "Coat of Arms." College History Website, <<http://www.hillsdale.edu/collegehistory/coatofarms.htm>>, accessed January 21, 2005.