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Joey Barretta Presents Doctoral Research

Ph.D. student addresses Frederick Douglass and post-slavery America

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Doctoral student Joey Barretta presented his dissertation research titled “Frederick Douglass on the Necessary Prescriptions of Freedom: Proscriptions for Post-Slavery America” on Nov. 1. Barretta spoke on Douglass’s writings and political philosophy during the post-Civil War and Reconstruction periods.

“While Douglass is best known for his work centered on slavery and his harrowing escape from that institution, this project for America after slavery and emancipation has not been sufficiently examined in other scholarly treatments,” Barretta said.

Barretta argued in his dissertation that Douglass’s plan for reconstruction and reintegration required participation from all members and aspects of American society.

“A careful study of Douglass shows that he had a comprehensive program to attain a more equal station for his race that included reforms in the social, cultural, and political realms,” he said.

“An important element of Douglass’s work was his exhortation to all Americans, both white and black, to actively seek to improve themselves and obtain the virtues necessary for citizens living in a republic.”

Barretta also noted that Douglass’s program was influenced by the political theory of the American Founding. “Douglass’s conception of American society is rooted in his interpretation of the Founding, and he believed that realizing the natural rights principles of the Founding would be instrumental in elevating black people,” Barretta argued.

Parts of Douglass’s plan, Barretta pointed out, included supporting marriage and the family among former slaves, providing access to education, and welcoming former slaves into the American society as equals.

“Douglass wanted Americans to live a life fitting their rational nature and moral capacity,” Barretta argued. “He believed manhood was greater than race. He wanted society to move away from the particulars of race and instead focus on the qualities inherent in human beings by their nature.”

Kevin Portteus, professor of politics and director of American studies at Hillsdale College, served as Barretta's dissertation chair and introduced the presentation. Portteus said that most current research on Douglass centers on his writings before and during the Civil War, but that Barretta's dissertation provides crucial analysis of Douglass's post-Civil War thought.

"Dr. Barretta, by contrast, shows that Douglass had a coherent program for reconstruction of the country after the war, as well as for the integration of millions of black Americans into the fabric of American life," Portteus said.

Barretta's presentation marked the first completed dissertation of the academic year at the Van Andel Graduate School of Statesmanship. Barretta successfully passed his dissertation defense a week prior to his presentation and will officially receive his doctoral degree in December 2022. The presentation was followed by a brief reception.

For a high-resolution copy of the Hillsdale College clocktower logo, click [here](#).

About Hillsdale College Graduate School of Statesmanship

The Van Andel Graduate School of Statesmanship was founded in 2010 "to educate students in the language of American constitutionalism and to place its graduates in positions of public service in politics, in journalism, in the Academy, and elsewhere." Its courses of study, which culminate in either a Master of Arts or a Doctor of Philosophy in Politics, are centered around the core texts from the Western and American traditions of political thought — what Thomas Jefferson called the "elementary books of public right." All admitted students received a full-tuition scholarship and admitted Ph.D. students receive an additional living stipend. For more information, gradschool.hillsdale.edu.

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent, nonsectarian, Christian liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 6.3 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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