

## **“THE NATION OF THE EDUCATED”**

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I am very pleased to be here today. I come partly as an emissary of the New World, the “America” inscribed in the name of the American College of Greece, and partly as a fellow collegian. For though I am not a graduate of Deree College, I join you today as a fellow reader of worthy books, fellow examiner of important ideas, and fellow seeker of such truth as may be gained by means of disciplined intellectual inquiry and respect for evidence--as a fellow collegian in the fullest sense of that word.

Customarily, emissaries present their hosts with gifts. I offer only a gift of words. I hope to give you something worth keeping, but I know that words of advice are among the rare presents that are preferred in very small quantities.

When our national poet, Walt Whitman, proposed to speak for America, he proclaimed, “I am large, I contain multitudes.” What makes America multitudinous is not the great number of our people. There are nations larger in sheer population. Whitman’s multitude is the multitude of origins and variety: America as a place of immigrants from everywhere, and America as a place of vast, multitudinous mingling.

In this sense, since its founding, the United States has provided a continuing commentary on the idea of nationhood. Other nations, comprised in actuality of people from many origins, nonetheless cling to the myth that they share an ancient common origin. The United States stands as a living refutation of that idea of nationalism. It asserts that nationhood can arise through a much more direct amalgam of peoples who have in common nothing but the desire for freedom and the rule of law.

The American experiment in nationhood is an extraordinary thing, and it does not always rest easy with its own people. The jagged edges of the ethnic identities drawn into the multitude sometimes rip the fabric of American life; and a multitudinous composition is no sure protection against the uglier forms of national self-assertion that may seize a people. We have one great defense against the twin dangers of ethnic divisiveness and nationalistic belligerence--and that is education. The American liberal arts college is, in this way, profoundly linked to the modern ideal of a free people, energetically committed to the common good but imbued as well with the spirit of political temperateness and tolerance.

The ancient historian Herodotus tells us that when the Greeks arrived in Greece, they encountered a people called the Pelasgians. So far as Herodotus knew, the Pelasgians were the original inhabitants of Greece, and he suggested

that they were born from the land itself. This curious bit of folklore contains a modern lesson for nationalists. We all come from somewhere. Even the Pelasgians, archaeologists now tell us, were but one of many immigrant peoples who settled pre-historic Greece. Every nation would be an America, containing its own multitude, if only it knew and acknowledged its true past.

I do not speak against nationalism: a tempered respect for the larger community, an understanding of its history, a robust pleasure in its best traditions and culture are an important foundation of civilized life. Nationalism *can* be constructive, but we live in a world in which narrow and dangerous nationalisms are on the rise. We need only think of the agonies of the former Yugoslavia, and of Rwanda, to remind ourselves of the horrors that lurk at the margins of obsessive nationalism and ethnic chauvinism.

The American experience teaches that nationalism based on blood or soil is not our only choice; a nation may be synthesized from a multitude of people from diverse cultures; and we may build a nation on adherence to a set of shared principles. That idea, however, is far older than America. In fact, it is--like so many other ideas of enduring power--a Greek invention. So it is that today I am able to address you as your compatriot in that *other* nation, the nation of educated men and women in all times and places.

Your hard work at Deree College has earned you citizenship in that invisible nation. You have learned its ways: that it keeps its borders open, that it speaks every language, and that its constitution is the tradition of the liberal arts--those studies worthy of a free person. As citizens of this country, you need no passport, but you will have to live up to its strenuous demands on your character and your mind. It does not ask you to forsake your loyalty to family, home, or flag, but it does ask that you live up to those loyalties in light of your knowledge of something larger, a culture that spans the whole world and nearly 100 human generations.

During the fifth century B.C., Athens enjoyed unprecedented democracy, wealth, culture, and scientific achievement. The Athenians could have lost themselves in self-admiration and contempt for the rest of the world; and indeed Athenians *were* tempted. Theirs was a splendid city, and they knew it--but they took a different path from that pursued by today's ethnic nationalists.

When the city-state of Athens fell in 404 B.C., its cultural achievements might have fallen too. Instead, the energies that had gone into governing the Athenian Empire, as the great historian Werner Jaeger noted, "simply shifted to another sphere: away from that of practical politics to that of intellectual effort for inward regeneration."

This astonishing intellectual flowering transformed Athenian identity. The Athenians came to see themselves no longer as one people separated from all others by their particular history, but as participants in something larger, as heirs to *paideia*, a self-conscious and highly disciplined ideal of culture and education. *Paideia* transformed a parochial Athenian political identity into a universal intellectual form, available to anyone willing to do the hard work to become educated.

More than this, the Athenians taught future generations how to transmit this identity from one generation to the next. Socrates was, perhaps, the greatest teacher. As Cicero wrote, "Socrates was the first to bring philosophy down from the heavens; he took it to men's cities, and introduced it to their homes; he forced it to inquire about life and morals, about good and evil." Plato, in choosing to present his ideas in dialogues, showed how the right questions at the right time can be the most effective means of education. Athenian intellectuals showed all future generations how the ideals of their society could live within any person who, in good will, diligently pursued its aims.

Although the city-state of Athens was no longer sovereign after 404 B.C., its science, literature, and philosophy survived, preserved in the mind and passed across the ages. Athens became far more than just "the school of Hellas"; it became the college of western

civilization. It created the disciplines, the pedagogy, and the philosophy that have been the basis of western education ever since.

Today, the American liberal arts college stands out as the best embodiment of the Athenian ideal of *paideia*. You know this legacy well. You have studied in the shadow of the very city in which the ideal of *paideia* was formed, at a college whose American roots were nourished by this ideal.

So count yourself twice over among the heirs of *paideia*, and among the blessed. This disciplined and austere way of thinking, born in Athens, became the nation of the educated. It is the true cosmopolis--the *polis* that encompasses the entire world and offers citizenship to all, regardless of race or blood or birth, who seek the truth with humility and good faith, respecting reason and evidence.

W.E.B. Du Bois, the African-American writer, celebrated “the chance to soar in the dim blue air” above the racism of his day. “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not,” Du Bois wrote. “Across the color line, I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas...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 graciously with no scorn nor condescension.”

If your education at Deree College has been successful, if you understand *paideia*, you recognize Du Bois as compatriot, regardless of the nation from which he sprang.

You may leave this city, but through your education, eternal Athens lives in you, and you will have the company of its citizens in the hours, however lonely, and the cities, however foreign, through which your life will wind. You are prepared to build nations--for every generation builds them anew--and you are equipped with the knowledge and understanding needed to build them large and to make them graceful, civilized, and humane. Be grateful today for the legacy that is now yours. There is no greater gift.