

**Commencement Address
Augustana College
May 23, 2004
Chairman Bradley A. Smith**

Thank you.

As I thought about what I might say to the Augustana College class of 2004, it occurred to me that a good percentage of you would have been born in 1982. 1982, as it happens, is the year that the situation comedy “Family Ties” debuted on television, starring Michael J. Fox as Alex P. Keaton. And I recalled an early episode of that show, in which the father was packing a school lunch for Alex’s younger sister. As he packed a piece of fruit, Alex, who had been observing the process, noted, “You don’t need to put that in there.”

“Oh?” said the Dad.

“No. See, we don’t eat the fruit. We eat the cookies, maybe half of the sandwich, but the fruit we just throw away.”

“I know that,” replied the Dad. “But as a parent, I’m required to pack it anyway.”

I suppose that commencement ceremonies are much the same. You like the parties and gifts and being the center of your families’ attentions; receiving the diploma isn’t bad. The Commencement address? Well, that’s the apple in the lunchbox. But we as educators fill required to provide it anyway.

Now, I graduated twenty-four years ago from a school not unlike Augustana – Kalamazoo College. Like Augustana, it is a church affiliated, liberal arts college in a pleasant, mid-sized Midwestern city. I can remember – with some difficulty – who was the commencement speaker at my graduation, but I confess I don’t recall a word of what

he said, or even recall him speaking. So I come before you today with few illusions – yet determined to do my duty.

If I have long since forgotten what was said at my own Commencement, I am reminded every day of the benefits of my education in the liberal arts. The question often raised by nervous parents – not to mention many nervous graduates - is: “What does one do with a degree in the liberal arts? Can one make a living by hanging out a shingle reading, “History Major Available for Consultation: Inquire Within.” Or as my wife’s faculty advisor said to her when she asked his opinion on whether to pursue studies in philosophy or theology: “It doesn’t matter. Starbucks hires both.”

Well, that’s the pithy answer, but in reality, what do liberal arts majors do? I suggest to you that they do everything, and they do anything.

When I think of the ideal liberal arts graduate, I think, for example, of my college classmate Wendy, who opened a veterinary clinic in Amish country in Ohio. Some of the Amish built her a barn in lieu of cash payment, and over time she built a successful practice. Then she took a vacation in the South Pacific island of Vavau. How many of us have spent a vacation on the beach and thought, “Ah, this is the life?” Or at least dreamed of it? Well, Wendy not only thought that: she returned to Ohio, sold her practice, and moved to Vavau, where she opened a scuba diving business, and neutered cats and dogs for free on the side. This is what liberal arts majors can do.

That same sense of intellectual adventure, confidence to take risks, and lifelong love of learning is present in those who have gone before you at Augustana. For example, there’s Dr. Timothy Johnson, Augustana class of ’58. A history major while he was here, today he is a Research Fellow in Surgery at Harvard Medical School, and

Medical Editor for ABC News. A far cry from history, indeed. Or there's Thomas Weigand, class of '85, who majored in geography, and his business partner Aaron Kennedy, who majored in journalism and English at Augustana: together they launched the Noodles & Company restaurant chain. Given that company now has restaurants from Maryland to Utah, I'm sure the geography major comes in handy.

The point, of course, is that your education here at Augustana has prepared you for far more than you may even imagine. But do not think that your education has value only if used for such "practical" career purposes. Do not set down your textbooks and think the learning has stopped. I think of another of my classmates, Ernie, who entered college with a single minded determination to become a doctor. And he did become a doctor. But, I think to his surprise, he acquired something beyond that most practical pre-med education. He discovered the joy of learning and knowing. I'm not sure he even realized it by the time we had reached commencement. But over the years, while pursuing a successful career in medicine, he found himself returning to school again and again, until he had earned three other graduate degrees. When I last saw Ernie, he had hired a tutor to teach him Chinese in the evenings. Why? For no other reason than because, around the time he turned 40, he decided that he would like to be able to speak Chinese.

For the liberal arts major, learning never stops. When former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes – a graduate in the liberal arts - was 92 years old, President Franklin Roosevelt paid him a visit, and found Holmes reading Plato in the original Greek. The President asked him why he was bothering to study Greek at his age, to which Holmes replied, "to improve my mind."

So a liberal education is good for your career, and rewarding in your life. But education in the liberal arts is also vital to our nation's public life. In his seminal work, *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Cardinal Newman noted that the training of the intellect was not only of value to the individual's own purposes, but that it, "best enables him to discharge his duties to society." Two generations before Newman, the founders of our nation shared that view. They considered an educated public of paramount importance to the maintenance of the republic. They believed that because they believed that reasoned discourse was essential to the long term success of democratic-republican government. Reasoned discourse, they understood, requires that individuals be free to think and to speak as their consciences might instruct them. And so they viewed free speech and free inquiry, those most liberal of virtues, as among the most precious freedoms.

Free speech and inquiry were precious for two reasons: first, because they allowed the individual to develop the knowledge and to exercise the freedom of thought necessary to his own self-realization, as in some of the individual examples I have mentioned; and second, because they provided for public discourse necessary for a democratic republic to flourish.

Today, sadly, we find the liberal belief in free political speech, debate, and thought, at one of its periodic ebb tides. One threat to this freedom, in the political arena, is found in the excesses of the campaign finance reform movement. Increasingly, that movement perceives free speech as a threat to democracy, rather than as a bulwark of democracy. No one has put this more plainly than Representative Richard Gephardt, who, while serving as House Minority Leader a few years back, stated, "We have two

important values in conflict: freedom of speech, and our desires for healthy campaigns in a healthy democracy.” How different this is from the founders, who saw free speech as an indispensable part of a healthy democracy. Former Senator Bill Bradley, while running for President in 2000, offered a concrete proposal: he proposed taxing political speech at a 100% rate. What a far cry this is from the liberal ideal. Yet this proposal scarcely raised an eyebrow in the national press. We are, I think, in little danger of such a proposal passing soon. But the government does have its tentacles already deeply into our political speech.

There was a time, not long ago, when the honest person participating in a political campaign could feel reasonably secure that he could say what he wanted, and spend what he wanted to foster his beliefs. There was a time when a candidate, say a young lawyer, might begin his campaign for office with a small fundraiser held in the lobby of his law firm. A speech or two would be made; a hat would be passed to collect donations. Today, such activity would potentially run afoul of a plethora of federal laws and regulations governing cash contributions, anonymous contributions, reporting of contributions, use of corporate property, and other regulations.

Many of you parents in the audience have spent thousands of dollars – indeed, tens of thousands of dollars – to pay for the education of these proud graduates. Yet under the law, if you were to give your child just \$5000 to run for congress, you would be committing a felony subject to possible time in prison. In my years at the Federal Election Commission, we have indeed pursued parents for contributing too much to their children, children for contributing too much to their parents, and husbands for contributing too much to their wives. Under our campaign finance laws, if the Augustana

College Republicans or the Augustana College Democrats were to hold bake sales and car washes, and then to spend \$300 of the proceeds to run radio ads supporting the candidacy of George W. Bush or John F. Kerry, they would be required to file reports of their activity with the federal government, with fines and penalties for the failure to do so.

It is a fact that under the Supreme Court's jurisprudence today, criticism of a congressman close to an election receives less constitutional protection than does internet pornography, simulated child pornography, tobacco advertising, topless dancing, defamation, flag burning, or burning a cross outside a black church.

Many Americans today are alarmed at what they fear are excesses in the Patriot Act. The Act goes too far, they feel, in invading privacy in order to fight terrorism. Much has been made, in particular, of allegations that the Act would allow government officials to obtain a warrant to search your library records (although apparently that has yet to happen). Yet today, under the guise of campaign finance reform and political disclosure, the federal government compiles and maintains a database of citizen political activity. This data is then made available, over the internet, to anyone who wants to use it: your nosy neighbor; the telephone marketer; a prospective employer; or government agencies. All of this is done in the name of the public's "right to know" the identity of political speakers. The loss of privacy inherent in these requirements should give us pause: for example, should the government place the name of a contributor to the Log Cabin Republicans, an association of gay Republicans, on the World Wide Web for all to see? Should the young lawyer striving for partner status in the Republican law firm be forced to disclose his financial contributions to Democratic candidates?

The founders, I think, would have been appalled by this practice, not only for the loss of freedom and privacy entailed in such restrictions, but for the way in which we have allowed the identity of speakers to take precedence over the merit of the ideas actually placed into discourse. The essence of the liberal education is to focus on ideas and their intrinsic worth. In contrast, however, today most Americans seem to think that we can only judge the merit of an idea if we know the identity of the speaker.

The Federalist Papers, America's greatest contribution to political theory, setting forth the theory and benefits of our Constitution, were, you will recall, published anonymously. For many years the identities of the authors – Hamilton, Madison, and Jay – were a closely guarded secret. Similarly, opponents of the Constitution, honorable and talented men, equally patriotic, also wrote under pseudonyms. Why? For these men, to have written under their own names would have allowed the focus to be taken off the ideas discussed, and focused instead on the identities of the speakers. To these early political giants of American politics, it was vital that ideas be debated on the merits. By removing personalities from the debate, they hoped to assure that the merits would be addressed in civil discourse.

We have, of course, long since abandoned such strenuous efforts to keep the focus off the speakers and on the ideas. Yet that very emphasis on the speaker makes the tone of our civic discussions all the more important.

Recently my home town newspaper ran a column by a local schoolteacher, a civics teacher, of all things. Headlined, “Dear President Bush, I Love Thee Not,” this civics teacher gave us all an abject lesson in how not to conduct our civic debates. He accused the President of “lies and deceit,” and of being “downright ignorant.” He called

the President a “coward,” and a “narrow-minded, bigoted jackass.” He suggested that anyone who supported the President was “a victim of social promotion,” and that continued support for the President demonstrated only that Americans are “the dumbest people on earth” and that Bush supporters must lack, “the initiative to read a newspaper.” Now, whether you support or oppose the President’s re-election, or are indifferent, let me ask you, here in this serene setting, on this day of celebration: Do you think that if you had read this column, you would be persuaded of anything? Or have learned anything?

Recently, one prominent political group displayed on its web site two ads comparing the President to Adolph Hitler. That a public outcry caused the ads to be pulled from the web was a good sign, for those of us who care about the tenor of the debate. But it was not a good sign that shortly thereafter, filmmaker Michael Moore should appear at a fundraiser for the same group and explain the decision to pull the ads by suggesting that, “You don’t need Hitler when you already got Bush.”

More alarming still is that such casual incivility is not limited merely to those on the fringes of politics, such as Moore, or the occasional overwrought high school teacher. Rather, it comes increasingly from those in positions of power and political responsibility. Earlier this month, for example, a spokesman for the Democratic Party of Texas referred to a state Supreme Court Justice as a “Nazi.” Asked if an apology was due, the Party’s State Chairman replied, “I don’t have a problem that [he] said it.” In Washington, D.C., if you hope to meet the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee in his office, you must first walk over a doormat bearing the face of George W. Bush. There is, I’ll admit, a bit of frat level humor here, and I suspect that is the intent. But such words and actions from people in positions of power and responsibility

set a tone, a manner in which we become accustomed to addressing each other, and a habit of failing to grant one another the basic respect that is due in a civil society – a habit which can later be hard to shake.

It is not my goal to set forth a catalogue of uncivil incidents, nor should one presume from this handful of examples that this is a problem that only afflicts Democrats or political liberals, for that would surely be to draw the wrong lesson. For example, much has been made, and rightly so, of Senator Kerry's reference to his political opponents as "crooks and liars." However, little has been said about repeated allegations by the Republican National Committee that Senator Kerry and various Democratic and liberal groups are "blatantly" and "knowing and willfully" "violat[ing] campaign finance laws." At least some of these allegations appear to be based on a reading of the law that is, as attorneys for the party must recognize, something of a legal stretch, to say the least. To make conclusory allegations of lawbreaking based on such thin legal theories is wrong. The point here is that there is nothing to be gained by arguing "who started it," or who has been worse. Surely there is blame enough to go around.

This name calling and incivility can not be easily brushed away, because the resulting acrimony affects our ability to determine national policy. We are presently at war. Our opponent is a fanatical foe whose objective is nothing less than the destruction of the West and the liberal values it represents. On September 11, 2001, this enemy inflicted more casualties on American soil than any foreign foe since the War of 1812. Yet it seems that we are unable to even discuss the policies to be pursued without the debate immediately collapsing into allegations of "lies" or lack of patriotism. Once that

tone takes over the debate, serious discussion of these vital issues falls by the wayside. These issues are too serious for such treatment.

At the core of a free society must be the idea that government is about more than raw power; and for government to be about more than raw power we must believe that through honest discussion and analysis – in other words, that through debate and the application of reason – men and women can govern themselves. That debate is not fostered by demonizing those with whom we disagree.

It simply will not do to accuse our political opponents of mendacity when they may simply have reached a different conclusion or hold a different perception of the facts. We ought not to portray good men and women as new Hitlers simply because we disagree on political matters. Equally important, we must be prepared to renounce our political allies who step over the boundaries of civility. Arguing that our countrymen are liars, crooks, and traitors will not help us address the problems we face.

The liberally educated man or woman recognizes that he will not always be right. He engages in debate not only to persuade, but to learn and to be persuaded. We must be civil to one another, precisely because we will not always be right.

Now let me share with you just a few more accusations made about a presidential candidate:

“[He will] wrest[] the bible from the hands of [your] children.”

“[He has] obtained his property by fraud and robbery [...from] a widow.”

If he is elected, “we may see the Bible cast into a bonfire... our children, either wheedled or terrified, chanting mockeries against God [in our schools]... our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution.”

His tastes were “acquired during his residence among the French at Paris, to whom there could be no question he would sell his country at the first offer made to him cash down...”

Perhaps you are thinking that these are merely the latest attacks on John Kerry from what Democrats like to call the “Republican Attack Machine.” They do sound a bit like it, don’t they? In fact, these are things said about Thomas Jefferson during the campaign of 1800. Do not these accusations, hurled at one of the greatest Americans in the heat of a campaign, but now seen through the lens of history, seem patently absurd? Would not the speakers of such words, could they look down from Heaven and hear their allegations repeated back at them today, feel somewhat shamed, if not downright silly?

Politics requires candidates to compare and contrast their abilities and approaches to government. This cannot always be done in positive, glowing terms. But it is not necessary to stoop to the lowest depths. On two other occasions in our nation’s history, we have plumbed these depths of political discourse in much the manner that we are today. One was in the decade leading up to the Civil War, when the lack of civility reached such a state that fistfights among members of Congress were, if not routine, hardly rare, and when Congressman Preston Brooks walked onto the floor of the Senate and caned Massachusetts abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner senseless. The other came in the years prior to that election of 1800, when congress so lost faith in the power of debate that it actually passed a law – the Sedition Act – making it illegal to publish anything that could bring the government into “contempt or disrepute.” That law was then enforced in a purely partisan manner. Yet on that occasion, unlike the period leading up to the Civil War, we pulled up short of the abyss. Much of the credit for

pulling back from that abyss goes to Thomas Jefferson, the target of the rantings I quoted a moment ago.

As Jefferson wrote to a friend about that campaign of 1800, “It has been a source of great pain to me to have met with so many among our opponents who had not the liberality to distinguish between political and social opposition; who transferred at once to the person the hatred they bore his political opinions.”

Jefferson addressed this problem publicly in his first inaugural address, with words that bear repeating today:

“Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things. And let us reflect that having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, [and] as capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions... Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle...”

Then he closed with words worth remembering each time you are tempted to accuse your political rival of “lying” or “misleading” harboring some sinister, secret agenda: “I ask your indulgence for my own errors, which will never be intentional; and your support against the errors of others, who may condemn what they would not if seen in all its parts.” Jefferson’s point was this: remember that your political opponents are more likely to be in error than to be evil; more likely to have reached a different, but balanced, conclusion, based on the facts known to them, than to be stupid.

Before being elected President, Jefferson had served as member of the Virginia House of Burgesses; as Delegate to the Continental Congress; as Governor of Virginia; as

Ambassador to France, as our nation's first Secretary of State; and as Vice President. Yet at his request, none of these things, nor his presidency, are mentioned on his tombstone at Monticello. Rather, he sought to be remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and as the father of the University of Virginia. How could Jefferson have deemed serving as President of a University as more important than serving as President of the United States? It was because Jefferson recognized the vital role of liberal education in safeguarding the other two grand accomplishments on that stone – the Declaration of Independence, and the Statute for Religious Freedom.

On the founding of the University of Virginia, he stated, "We fondly hope that the instruction which may flow from this institution, by advancing the minds of our youth with the growing science of the times, and elevating the views of our citizens generally to the practice of the social duties and the functions of self-government, may ensure to our country the reputation, the safety and prosperity, and all the other blessings which experience proves to result from the cultivation and improvement of the general mind."

So as you go forth from here, live up to these ideals of the liberal education which you have received. Be humble enough to recognize that you will not always be right, and with that recognition, do not mistake political error in others as wickedness, just as you would not have them mistake your errors for evil intentions. Conduct your debates with civility and good will, in the liberal ideal. Don't stop learning. And be prepared to enjoy all life has to offer. Today is a day to dream. You can do anything, and everything.

And now, having downed the fruit – let's eat more cookies. Congratulations Augustana Class of 2004.

