

Cornell and the Bicentennial

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As far as I can tell, the last time a Cornell historian appeared in these ceremonies was in 1885. I think it indicates much about the healthy relationships among colleges at Cornell when a former Engineering Dean, President Corson, and a graduate of the Cornell Law School, Mr. Purcell, conclude that a member of the History Department might have something to say, and should have an opportunity to say it -- at least once every ninety-one years. Their invitation is more remarkable since both men probably know the comment of the nineteenth-century British philosopher, Samuel Butler, who, when once asked why God allowed historians to exist, had to think a moment, then answered that since God Himself cannot change the past, He is obliged to tolerate historians who can.

Of course that historian in 1885 neither manipulated the past nor needed an invitation to speak at Commencement. As the co-founder and first president of Cornell, Andrew Dickson White arranged university activities pretty much to suit himself. He obviously arranged them so well that now each Cornell Commencement must not only

celebrate the achievements of the graduating classes, but celebrate the principles of the founders as well.

It is appropriate that we recall the ideas of Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White during the two hundredth birthday of the United States. The founders of this nation and the founders of Cornell shared a common commitment, indeed a common passion: a belief in the power of ideas to transform individual lives and to improve human society. As people who delight in achievements which are material and measureable, Americans have tended to equate greatness with the size of a nation's gross national product, and power with the amount of a military budget. But a gross national product is beneficial only when distributed equitably, and armaments have defended the ideas of dictators as well as of democracies.

We might therefore recall that in 1776 this nation was dedicated in the first instance not to size, but to a "proposition," as Lincoln later phrased it, a proposition that we "have certain unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

It is that idea we commemorate during the Bicentennial, that idea and the breaking of the colonial bonds with England so we could be free to fulfill the vision. Many historians now believe that the war of 1776 to 1783 was not a revolution, certainly not in the sense of the later French, Russian, or Chinese revolutions, when property and political power were radically redistributed to those societies. That kind of revolution did not occur, nor has it ever occurred in the United States.

The ideas of 1776, not the war, were truly revolutionary. Thus the fundamental question in American history was posed: could revolutionary ideas survive in an unrevolutionary society? It has proved to be an explosive question as well. For when they agreed there were "certain unalienable Rights," the Founding Fathers did not assign such rights to several million black slaves. The revolutionary rhetoric and the unrevolutionary reality clashed, culminating in the horrors of the Civil War, then later, and more hopefully, the struggles of the civil rights movement. When the founders agreed that "All men are created equal," they tended to think of "men" more in the masculine than in the generic sense. Again the revolutionary rhetoric and an unrevolutionary society clashed, eventually producing the national women's movements of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century.

In these and other cases, we have had to realize that the Declaration of Independence does not guarantee certain unalienable rights. The founders only claimed that such rights existed. They left the precise definition of those rights, and how they might be guaranteed to all, to their descendants. They thus left us a legacy of crisis and conflict, but also promise and opportunity. This is where Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White, and indeed all of us, enter history.

White and Cornell tried to define some of those rights more precisely and to extend them to new social classes. The two founders advocated revolutionary ideas in a society they knew (in fact, a

society they fervently preferred), to be unrevolutionary. But they also believed that a great university could help prevent the explosions, and yet make real the ideas so that, as Cornell once remarked, the twentieth-century could be "a new era in religion and humanity." So the founders set down the propositions to which their university would be dedicated.

As White recorded his thoughts, he wanted a school "where the most highly prized instruction may be afforded to all -- regardless of sex or color," a school "to turn the current of mercantile morality which has so long swept through this land. . . . To temper and restrain the current of military passion which is to sweep through the land [after the Civil War]. . . . To afford an asylum for Science . . . where it shall not be the main purpose of the Faculty to stretch or cut science exactly to fit 'Revealed Religion'. . . . To afford a center and a school for a new Literature," and to provide the "rudiments, at least, of a legal training in which Legality shall not crush Humanity." To this, Ezra Cornell added that his institution must help "the poor young men and the poor young women of our country." In the 1970s we are concerned about bridging the so-called "two cultures," that is, the sciences and humanities. But Ezra Cornell understood there is a more dangerous gap between two other cultures, the rich and the poor. He dedicated his university to closing that gap.

These propositions of White and Cornell radically changed higher education in the United States and helped to create the world in which

we live, whether or not we are Cornellians. But just as Jefferson's proposition of 1776 has haunted us ever since, White's and Cornell's ideas have afflicted this university with crises, for it is not easy to act -- as the founders intended this university to act -- as the midwife when revolutionary ideas enter an unrevolutionary society.

White and Cornell were bitterly attacked by officials of established universities. Their wild experiment in educating men and women in the same institution was ridiculed, not least by many jealous Cornell males who went out of their way to segregate and ignore the females. This led one Cornell woman to reflect a century ago: "Cornell must be a good place for a girl to get an education; it has all the advantages of a university and a convent combined."

The university's founders also determined that Cornell would be unsectarian and not controlled by any single religious group, as were other American colleges. For holding to such an ideal the school was labelled "infidel Cornell," and "dangerous Cornell." White told of a minister who infiltrated a campus dance, then reported to the waiting world that clearly the campus was "destructive to vital godliness." White answered the charge, noting that the university encouraged the practice of religious faith, and indeed provided a beautiful chapel for worship, but it would never be controlled by any one faith. Such attacks nevertheless took their toll. For example, financial support dwindled, and just a little over a century ago unpaid booksellers sent the county sheriff up the hill to place legal claims on the

university library's volumes. By 1876 even White had reached his limit. The exhausted Cornell president left for a year's leave in Europe. He so missed the enchantment of his presidential duties that he decided to stay in Europe a second year.

But the university's friends, including of course White, remained committed to the founders' propositions. The school celebrated the nation's Centennial in 1876 by continuing to develop a great university library; by building in the Physics Department a dynamo that became a wonder of the scientific world and a leading attraction at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition; and by conferring a large number of degrees, including the first doctorate of veterinary medicine given in the United States.

The crises would continue, as they must in any vital institution dedicated to ideas such as Cornell's and White's. For just as Jefferson could not guarantee us certain unalienable rights, neither could White and Cornell guarantee that their ideas would be fully achieved by 1976. They left the care of those ideas to us. For example, Ezra Cornell's dream that qualified men and women from all economic classes might study in American colleges has never been realized. The poor have not enjoyed an unalienable right of equal access to higher education. Moreover, economic pressures in the 1970s have helped to produce a seven percent decline in the number of college students from middle income families. We are now steadily moving toward the polarization of the two cultures which Ezra Cornell so feared.

The founders also bequeathed another problem to us. During the McCarthyism of the 1950s, the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the free speech controversy of the past year, the university inevitably served as an intellectual battleground where the revolutionary promises of Jefferson, Cornell and White clashed with an unrevolutionary society. The university, as White and Cornell foresaw, has no choice but to serve as that kind of intellectual battleground. Yet precisely because the university must be dedicated to rational discourse and the power of ideas, it is terribly vulnerable. If, therefore, it is to continue to serve its most important function, there is one requirement: coercion cannot replace discussion, for coercion surely breeds more coercion until the survivor is determined less by who is right than by who is strong. When that occurs, the purpose of a university, its reason for existence, is destroyed. "Error of opinion may be tolerated," Jefferson wrote, "where reason is left free to combat it."

You now leave a university and enter a society whose founders were alike in that both the school and the nation were dedicated to a new vision. As a member of the faculty of that university I congratulate you, wish you well in the society, and hope you will understand that the vision of those founders will inevitably clash with the reality of the present. Yet unless we wish to surrender their vision, we have no choice but to share their passion for certain ideas. A bad historian, as Samuel Butler observed, might change the past. But if we disavow the past by disavowing the revolutionary

ideas of Jefferson, White and Cornell, we do so at the peril of
losing our own future.