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THE CHRISTIAN LIBERAL-ARTS SCHOOL AT THE HEART OF THE CULTURE WARS

Conservatives like Ron DeSantis see Hillsdale College as a model for education nationwide.

By Emma Green
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In the past two decades, Hillsdale has vastly expanded its influence, partly through its ties to Republican politics. Illustration by Álvaro Bernis

Conservative movements to reform education are often defined by what they're against. At a recent public briefing, the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, decried the imposition of critical race theory and mandatory diversity-and-inclusion training at the state's schools. He pledged to counter "ideological conformity" and "administrative bloat." On the other hand, when DeSantis and other Republican politicians try to articulate what they're for—what exactly they want education to look like—one name comes up repeatedly: Hillsdale College. DeSantis has said that he probably wouldn't hire someone from his alma mater, Yale. But "if I get somebody from Hillsdale," he said, "I know they have the foundations necessary to be able to be helpful in pursuing conservative policies." In January, DeSantis's chief of staff told *National Review* that the governor hoped to transform New College of Florida, a public liberal-arts school, into a "Hillsdale of the South." One of the people involved in implementing the reforms is a dean and vice-president at Hillsdale.

Hillsdale College, a school in southern Michigan with roughly sixteen hundred students, was founded by abolitionist, Free Will Baptist preachers in 1844. Today, the college is known as a home for smart young conservatives who wish to engage seriously with the liberal arts. The Hillsdale education has several hallmarks: a devotion to the Western canon, an emphasis on primary sources over academic theory, and a focus on equipping students to be able, virtuous citizens. There is no department of women's and gender studies, no concentrations on race and ethnicity. It's a model of education that some scholars consider dangerously incomplete. It's also a model that communities across the country are looking to adopt.

In the past two decades, Hillsdale has vastly expanded its influence, partly through its ties to Republican politics. The college has had a presence in Washington, D.C., for fifty years, and in 2010 it opened a second campus there, largely for graduate students, in a row of town houses across from the Heritage Foundation. The faculty includes Michael Anton, the former Trump Administration official known for his essay "The Flight 93 Election," in which he wrote that voting for Donald Trump was the only way to save America from doom, and David Azerrad, a former Heritage Foundation director who has described America as being run on a system of "Black privilege." In recent years, speakers at Hillsdale events have included Justices Clarence Thomas and Amy Coney Barrett, then a circuit-court judge. Thomas, whose wife, Virginia, once served on the Hillsdale Board of Trustees, has referred to the college as "a shining city on a hill." Alumni have gone on to serve in powerful government positions: Kevin McCarthy's former deputy chief of staff, three Supreme Court clerks from the last term, and speechwriters for the Trump Administration all attended Hillsdale.

The school welcomes conservative provocateurs—Dinesh D'Souza and Andy Ngo, among others—to speak at events, publishing some of the talks in *Imprimis*, a monthly digest of speeches. In 2021, Hillsdale tapped two of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration—an open letter that advocated against widespread lockdowns early in the pandemic—to help launch the Academy for Science and Freedom, "to combat the recent and widespread abuses of individual and academic freedom made in the name of science."

The primary architect of Hillsdale's rise to prominence is the college's president, Larry Arnn. "Education is the purpose of society," he told me. "If you want to help, as a citizen, your country, I think that's the way." Last November, Arnn gave a speech in which he described education as a cultural battleground, arguing that public schools have recently "adopted the purpose of supplanting the family and controlling parents." To address this concern, Hillsdale has ventured outside of higher education, helping to launch K-12 charter schools nationwide. Arnn has set an ambitious mission for this project, one that suggests Hillsdale is only getting started in its fight to reclaim American education: "We're going to try to find a way to teach anyone who wants us to help them learn."

I arrived at Hillsdale College on the morning of freshman convocation. My drive to the main campus, which is about two hours southwest of Detroit, led me past farms and cow pastures, and along an unpaved road. As I pulled up, I was greeted by a bronze statue of a Civil War soldier carrying a flag with a broken staff. More than four hundred Hillsdale students fought on behalf of the Union, which the school says is the most of any private college in the North—a fact that I would be reminded of often during my visit.

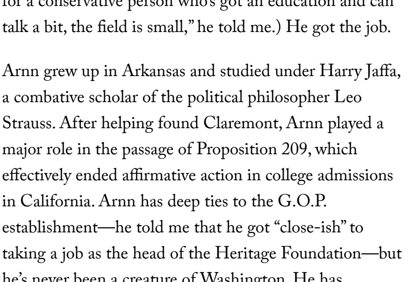
The convocation was held in one of the school's athletic centers. Professors streamed past me in full regalia, looking like brightly colored fish amid the schools of new students. A string quartet played at the front of the room. (Hillsdale is not an a-cappella kind of place, though a third of the students study music, often classical.) A curly-haired senior kicked off the ceremony. "We're always one graduating class away from losing the student culture here," she said from the lectern. "Hold yourself to a higher standard, because it's what you need. It's what Hillsdale needs. It's what our country needs. It's what God demands."

Next up was the president. Arnn, who is seventy, wore blue robes with a pin-striped suit and black tennis shoes that looked vaguely orthopedic. He spoke to the crowd about the virtues of pursuing truth. "There are things to know," he explained. "They are beautiful things to know that will make you better if you know them." As he wrapped up his comments, he noted that Winston Churchill was a "blubberer," and that no one should be ashamed of getting emotional as they said goodbye.

Parents wept as they clung to their children. A bagpiper played the piercing melody of "Scotland the Brave," making it feel as though the kids were getting sent into battle at the foot of the Highlands, rather than just being dropped off at school. Orientation advisers hovered around the room, wearing T-shirts bearing Hillsdale's motto, *Virtus Tentamine Gaudet:* "Strength rejoices in the challenge."

Arnn came to Hillsdale in 2000, while the school was emerging from national scandal. For twenty-eight years, the college had been led by George Roche III, a prominent libertarian. His daughter-in-law, Lissa Roche, who worked at the school, came to occupy a role akin to First Lady of Hillsdale. She was also, evidently, in love with her father-in-law. One day, she claimed that they had long been romantically involved. (He denied the affair.) Shortly afterward, she took a revolver out of her husband's gun cabinet and went to the school's arboretum, where she killed herself. "It was traumatic," David Whalen, an English professor and a former provost, told me. "There's no soft-pedalling it."

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER
You'll Be Happier: The Story of a Butt Lift



George Roche resigned, and a committee scrambled to find his replacement. Arnn—a friend of one of the committee members, the conservative firebrand William F. Buckley, Jr.—was at the top of the shortlist. At the time, Arnn was the head of the Claremont Institute, a conservative think tank in California. ("If you're looking for a conservative person who's got an education and can talk a bit, the field is small," he told me.) He got the job.

Arnn grew up in Arkansas and studied under Harry Jaffa, a combative scholar of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. After helping found Claremont, Arnn played a major role in the passage of Proposition 209, which effectively ended affirmative action in college admissions in California. Arnn has deep ties to the G.O.P. establishment—he told me that he got "close-ish" to taking a job as the head of the Heritage Foundation—but he's never been a creature of Washington. He has preferred to cultivate his influence from afar.

In 2020, Trump formed the 1776 Commission, in response to the rise of critical race theory and the *Times'* 1619 Project; its aim was to promote education about America's "inspiring" founding. He picked Arnn to chair the group, which included Mike Pompeo and Ben Carson as ex-officio members. A few years before that, Arnn had published a book, "The Founders' Key," claiming that the progressive movement had weakened the power of America's founding documents. It landed blurbs from Republican politicians such as Paul Ryan, Mike Lee, and Tom Cotton, whose wedding Arnn says he attended. "We're from Arkansas," Arnn said of Cotton. "We're cousins." (Not in the real way, Arnn clarified, but in "the Arkansas way.")

The word "conservative" doesn't feature prominently in Hillsdale's promotional materials; the school simply describes itself as a "small, Christian, classical liberal arts college." When I asked Arnn and other professors whether Hillsdale is conservative, they all gave the same, slightly uncoöperative answer: yes, in the sense that Hillsdale is "conserving things."

Many students identify as conservative, although the ones I spoke with said that this manifests in different ways. Will McIntosh, who grew up in Iowa as the son of a Baptist preacher, enthusiastically briefed me on the virtues of the Austrian school of economics, one of Hillsdale's specialties. (Ludwig von Mises, a major figure in that movement, donated his library to Hillsdale.) Colton Duncan, a devout Catholic from Ohio, rejects libertarianism, saying that he and his friends frequently discuss how to cultivate a moral economic system as an alternative to "woke capitalism and neocolonialism." The ardently pro-Trump contingent on campus appears to be small, both among students and staff. Paul Rahe, a history professor, said he doubted that a majority of the faculty voted for Trump in 2016. (Arnn endorsed Trump after the Republican primary that year, joining a group of conservative intellectuals who wrote that he was the candidate "most likely to restore the promise of America.") These days, the campus seems to favor DeSantis over Trump, according to a recent survey by the student newspaper.

Some people are surprised to find, upon arriving on campus, that there is relatively little appetite for partisanship. Politics just "wasn't in the mouths of my peers or the administration," Tori Hope Petersen, a 2018 graduate, told me. Arnn steers students away from partisan acrimony. "There's rumors going around that I'm not fully satisfied with the condition of the government of the United States," he said, to approving laughter and applause, at a parents' dinner after the convocation. "I want you to know, we are going to discourage your child from being much involved in all that."

And yet, beyond its campus, Hillsdale has waded directly into political conflicts, in large part by hosting speakers and disseminating their hotly contested ideas via *Imprimis*, which has more than six million subscribers—roughly twice as many as the Washington *Post*. Christopher Rufo, the researcher and conservative activist who spearheaded the campaign against critical race theory, gave a talk at the school last spring called "Laying Siege to the Institutions," in which he argued that conservatives will never win the fight against progressivism "if we play by the rules set by the élites who are undermining our country." Roger Kimball, of the conservative arts journal *The New Criterion*, claimed in a lecture that Democrats and the media vastly overhyped "the January 6th hoax," noting that "every honest person knows that the 2020 election was tainted."

Hillsdale's public image has made it difficult for Arnn to remain in some scholarly circles. "Even prior to the Trump Administration, he had given a lot of people in the academic world real pause," George Thomas, a professor at Claremont McKenna College and the director of the school's Salvatori Center, of which Arnn was a longtime adviser, told me. "Flirtation with the disreputable right, flirtation with serious racism, hysterical about progressives who disagree with you being threats to the constitutional order." Thomas happily let Arnn's term on the advisory board expire.

Several alumni told me a version of the same theory about the divergence between Hillsdale's internal and external identities. The college refuses any government funding, including federal aid to students, to avoid being subject to federal regulations such as Title IX, which forbids sex-based discrimination in higher education. But to attract people to a small liberal-arts college in Michigan—and to pay for their cloistered learning—Hillsdale needs to be a household name. So, like Benjamin Franklin lifting his kite and key in the lightning storm, Arnn harnesses the power of the culture wars for his own purposes. "Some alums cringe when Hillsdale is advertised on Fox News or Sean Hannity," Brittany Baldwin, a 2012 graduate who worked as a speechwriter in the Trump White House, told me. "They feel like it's underselling what Hillsdale really is. But Dr. Arnn is very smart, in the sense that he has found a way to reach millions of people who otherwise would have never known about the school, by focussing on the values that it has in common with many conservatives, who happen to be able to give the school money." When I asked Arnn if this assessment was correct, he replied, "I've said almost exactly that to Rush Limbaugh!"

One way the school reaches those conservatives is by offering a trove of free online courses, in which more than three million people have enrolled. "Probably the most common question that I have asked of me by students and friends of the college is 'What happened to my country?' " Kevin Slack, who teaches politics, says, in a course titled The American Left: From Liberalism to Despotism. Across roughly six hours of video lectures, Slack gives an overview of leftist movements since the First World War, explaining the influence of figures such as Antonio Gramsci and John Rawls. Diversity-and-inclusion officers are part of a "priesthood that goes sniffing through private lives to look for original sins of racism or genderism," Slack says. Progressive whites are "racial saviors" whose "greatest hostility and hatred is reserved for middle-class whites, who they seek to eradicate or enslave." Slack concludes the course with advice to conservatives. "Stop apologizing for everything," he says. "Understand that the tyranny you saw in 2020," including COVID-19 lockdowns and Black Lives Matter protests, "is what the left has in store for you: a constant apology, constant subjugation, and a deprivation of all of your rights."

Arnn imagines Hillsdale's project as a series of concentric circles: undergraduate and graduate education at the center, the school's online courses as the next ring, and its events and speakers as another. I understood how this works after talking with Will and Monica Trainor, a couple from Texas who have sent four of their children to Hillsdale. The Trainors discovered the school through *Imprimis*, and, when their eldest son was applying to college, they visited the campus and fell in love. Now Monica uses the school's online Constitution course in her children's homeschool curriculum, and she keeps a stack of Hillsdale promotional flyers on hand, occasionally giving them out to high-school seniors and parents in her community. "We spent eighteen years instilling our values in our son," Will explained. "We've seen too many of our friends lose kids that have gone in with certain family values and have come out not with those same values."

Throughout the years, Arnn has accrued another powerful set of Hillsdale allies: small-city-gentry types, who have often made modest fortunes in obscure industries, and who have been persuaded to dedicate some of their life's earnings to the school despite not having attended. One example is S. Prestley Blake, the co-founder of the Friendly's ice-cream-and-restaurant chain. In 2014, in honor of his hundredth birthday, Blake built a replica of

Monticello on his Connecticut estate, which he gave to Hillsdale; the college turned it into the Blake Center for Faith and Freedom. Charles Hoogland, a founder of the now defunct rental chain Family Video, and his wife, Kathleen, funded Hillsdale's Hoogland Center for Teacher Excellence. A few days after the freshman convocation, the school hosted an event called Ladies for Liberty, where female attendees paid a thousand dollars for four days of firearms instruction and lectures on the Constitution. The event was, in part, held at Hillsdale's shooting range, which, thanks to donor largesse, has become sophisticated enough to serve as an official training center for the U.S. Olympic shooting team.

"You don't get money by asking for it," Arnn told me. "You get money by showing them what you do." Between 2000, when he took over, and 2021, the latest year for which financial data is available, annual contributions to Hillsdale increased more than sevenfold, putting the school's fund-raising on par with that of élite liberal-arts colleges outside of the Ivy League. At an event last winter, DeSantis told Arnn, "The fact that you're able to raise money from people who didn't necessarily go here or have kids here shows you that people do value excellence. They value the truth."

Recently, a new craze has come to Hillsdale's campus: weight lifting. Last summer, the college installed exercise equipment in the dorms, in an effort to reduce stress and depression. ("There's been an explosion in student counselling since I've been here at the college," Arnn told parents. "I've never liked it.") The lifting trend started with Carl Young, a classics professor, whose faculty friends—mostly classicists and philosophers, "all ninety-pound weaklings," in Arnn's words—began joining Young at the gym. (Arnn has tagged along a few times.) One professor has joked that there should be a philosophy-and-weight-lifting club called Will to Power. I asked Young whether there's an ideological motivation behind the workouts—pushback against a culture where, say, men are weak and masculinity is diminished. He looked at me blankly. "I don't know about that," he said.

Luke Hollister, a junior from Washington State who serves as Hillsdale's head student ambassador, gave me a campus tour. We swung by the student union, the Grewcock Center, named for a Nebraska family who made their fortune in mining and construction. (The center tops Arnn's list of buildings to renovate; he finds it so ugly that he has nicknamed it Arnn's Shame.) We ambled down the Liberty Walk, where statues of history's great heroes line the college's well-manicured lawns: Ronald Reagan leans jauntily against a column, Margaret Thatcher sits insouciantly among the trees. Donors can sponsor a brick on the walk for a thousand dollars. ("Sadly, reports show that increasing numbers of schools are indoctrinating students with a false and dishonest narrative of our nation's history, presenting America as essentially and irredeemably flawed," Hillsdale's Web site reads. "Your Liberty Walk brick shows that you're on the battlefield of education, promoting the knowledge and understanding necessary to preserve liberty.")

Hillsdale has always been a Christian college, but several alumni told me that the school has played up its religious identity in recent years, perhaps as a way of enticing donors. (Arnn denied this, noting that the school's Christian roots are clear in its founding documents, although he acknowledged that Hillsdale used to be "shy" about its religiosity.) The college isn't a Christian school in the vein of Liberty University, which the Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell, Sr., founded to train "champions for Christ." But Arnn believes that a liberal-arts education requires students to grapple with questions about the nature of God. A perennial debate among students on campus is Protestantism versus Catholicism. Students tend to go on winding theological journeys, often gravitating toward more liturgically formal expressions of Christianity, such as Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. "You see a lot more appreciation for tradition," Michael Hoggatt, a junior from Wisconsin who grew up evangelical, said. "Lower-church students tend not to have that sort of catechesis." When I met him, he was attending an Anglican parish, and now he's in the process of converting to Catholicism. On Instagram, an unofficial Hillsdale meme account recently made a joke about new students: "catholic by fall. ring by spring."

In 2010, Hillsdale published a set of guidelines on the school's moral commitments. One states that "morally responsible sexual acts" occur "in marriage and between the sexes." The guidelines stress that students are admitted "regardless of their personal beliefs," though the school discourages "ideological pressures or actions that press the College to abandon its commitments or disrupt its good order." So although there are L.G.B.T.Q. students on campus, it is almost impossible for them to form clubs, and some have found it hard to speak openly about their identities. One alumnus told me that he was called into the dean's office after he was seen placing his head in his boyfriend's lap on the campus lawn. Mary Blendermann, a Hillsdale graduate who recently came out as gender fluid, described being socially ostracized as a sophomore after she cut her hair short and started dressing in a more masculine way. "People I used to sit with in the dining hall didn't really want to sit with me anymore," she said. Kailey Andrew, another graduate, told me she had received a short handwritten list of professors who were thought to support L.G.B.T.Q. students—people who were safe to talk to, behind closed doors.

As I walked around campus, it was also impossible not to notice the whiteness of the student body and the faculty. Every professor I met was a white man, except Khalil Habib, a politics professor, who is Lebanese Catholic. Hillsdale pointedly refuses to compile statistics on its students' racial backgrounds. Shortly before Arnn was hired, officials from the Michigan Department of Education visited the campus to determine whether the student body was sufficiently diverse. Years later, Arnn, testifying before a subcommittee of the Michigan state legislature, said that the officials had been looking for "dark ones," a phrase that he later apologized for using—kind of. "No offense was intended by the use of that term except to the offending bureaucrats, and Dr. Arnn is sorry if such offense was honestly taken," the school wrote in a statement. "But the greater concern, he believes, is the state-endorsed racism the story illustrates."

I asked Arnn whether the racial homogeneity on campus is a detriment to the school. "If it is—and I'm not confident that it is—it's not as important as having people here who want to be here," he replied. He sees Hillsdale's involvement with K-12 charter schools as an answer to the long-standing problem of educational inequalities. "Start early," he said. "Give everybody a chance. That's nearly all of what I want to do."

Arnn told a story about starting a program, early in his tenure, to bring students from inner-city Detroit to Hillsdale College. "It's on my list of dumb things I've done from which I've learned," he said. "They weren't ready to come here. They hadn't done any preparation. They thought it was a magical place—fancy." He paused for a moment. "It's fancier now!" Later, the college created the Frederick Douglass Scholarship, to support first-generation college students, along with those from low-income households or economically disadvantaged school districts. "Why should we favor a rich Black kid over a poor white kid?" Arnn said. "I don't want to tell a student here that that's the significant thing about them," he said, referring to race.

Some students appreciate this approach. Amy Buffini, a Black transfer student, told me that at her previous school, Point Loma Nazarene University, everyone was hyperaware of race and afraid of "saying the wrong thing." She's more at ease at Hillsdale. But Arnn's tendency to downplay race has also been controversial within the Hillsdale community. In the summer of 2020, after George Floyd's death, a few hundred alumni signed an open letter calling for the college to make a statement in support of the idea that Black lives matter. One alumna, the journalist Liz Essley Whyte, argued that proud moments in Hillsdale's history—such as when its football team refused to play in the 1955 Tangerine Bowl because its Black players were not allowed to participate—had been used to obscure instances in which the college had published or hosted racists and segregationists, such as the white supremacist Jared Taylor. Another alumnus, Will Smiley, an assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire, wrote a letter suggesting that Hillsdale overly catered to its conservative allies: "Perhaps the donors who once offered the college independence from the government now impose a straitjacket of their own."

Arnn told me that the college didn't make the statement that the alumni wanted because the events of that summer were "unfolding contemporary politics." He went on, "How do you even know what you think about them? George Floyd was not a particularly good fella. That matters, right? And he was killed, and that matters—a lot. We're not geared up around here to respond to the news." Besides, Arnn added, "we don't much like it when things are demanded of us."

The atmosphere on Hillsdale's campus might feel familiar to some visitors, particularly those who attended small liberal-arts schools decades ago. As Rahe, the history professor, put it, Hillsdale is like "Williams College, 1955, with girls." Bradley Birzer, another history professor, said that Hillsdale is among a group of "weirdo colleges," including St. John's, the University of Dallas, and the liberal-studies program at Notre Dame, that still believe in teaching a canon of great books.

When Arnn arrived, he established requirements in theology and philosophy, along with a semester-long Constitution course. The Political Science Department was renamed the Politics Department, on the notion that political study should be normative and philosophical instead of mechanical and data-driven. It was an explicit rebuke to the wonkish approach favored by many academics. Adam Carrington, a politics professor, told me, "You won't see much in the way of quantitative methods—regression lines, things like that." Meanwhile, students studying biology, chemistry, and physics learn about the human aspects of the scientific process, debating such topics as the role of prizes in incentivizing certain kinds of research. Hillsdale kids tend to be studious and eager. Habib, the politics professor, recalled that, during his first semester of teaching, a student corrected a word in the translation of Aristotle that the class was using.

According to Whalen, the former provost, Arnn carefully selects faculty members who support the school's mission of educating students in the Western philosophical tradition. "He's very clear about everybody pointing in the same direction," Whalen said. The college doesn't pretend to have faculty representing every school of thought; it doesn't keep a Marxist around just for the heck of it. Besides, "a course in Nietzsche would probably be more controversial than Marx," Birzer, the history professor, told me, with a chuckle. "Nietzsche is sort of the bête noire within the philosophy department, and somewhat within history, too. He's the guy we love to hate at the college."

I sat in on a Western Heritage class—one of the jewels of Hillsdale's core curriculum—taught by Birzer. None of the students had laptops out, and I didn't see a single cell phone. The words "Occident" and "Orient" were scribbled on a blackboard. Birzer's students were learning about Plato's Crito. Birzer explained that Socrates argues that unjust actions are always unjust, regardless of the circumstances. "Our modern thinkers tend to be very, very subjective," he said. "Socrates is the exact opposite: he says there is capital-'T' truth, and our life is to pursue what that truth is, even when it leads to our own harm or death." He pointed out the similarity between Socrates' insight and that of another great figure of the West. "Socrates got there about four hundred and fifty years earlier than Jesus did," Birzer said. "I'm not comparing the two—don't get me wrong. Obviously, Jesus is fully man and fully God."

The course's required textbook is "Western Heritage: A Reader," a collection of primary sources compiled by Hillsdale professors. Other classes use an American-heritage reader, which is dominated by white voices. The selected texts from the period following the Civil War include sources making the case for the Old South and the New South, but they don't deal directly with the reign of racial terror carried out during and after Reconstruction and into the twentieth century. At best, this is a problem inherent to the study of famous primary texts: those powerful enough to write history rarely focus on the stories of people at its margins.

Birzer recognized that "no reader is perfect"; in courses where Reconstruction is taught, students are also assigned a textbook by a Hillsdale professor to get more context on the hardships former slaves faced during that period. When I visited, he and another Hillsdale professor were in the process of recording lectures that students at other universities will be able to take for credit, significantly expanding Hillsdale's educational footprint. In the lectures, "we're going to confront the race issue as openly and directly as we can," Birzer told me. "We're not going to whitewash it at all. We're going to talk about what happened in Tulsa. We're going to talk about race riots." He was aware that many of the people likely to watch the videos will be conservative and affluent—and might not know much about the history of racial discrimination and violence in America. "A lot of conservatives kind of dropped the ball on how to deal with that issue," he said. In his view, however, too much of the contemporary conversation about race traffics in self-flagellation and apology. "We don't want to sit there and be these manly guys on World War II and then turn around and get sappy on race," he said.

According to Arnn, arguably the best professor at the school is Justin Jackson, who teaches English. ("He looks like Rasputin," Arnn said. "And I think he's kind of a liberal.") Jackson told me that when he first considered a job at Hillsdale, in the early two-thousands, he was circumspect: "When you read the Web page, you think, Oh, do you read Homer through a Reagan lens?" He worried about censorship. "You're told all the time: conservatives are going to crush your academic freedom." But that hasn't been his experience; he said that the horror stories he hears about crackdowns on academic freedom tend to come from his friends at more progressive institutions. (In recent years, Arnn has made himself a Lady Liberty to the pre-cancelled; he described a professor who started last fall as "a refugee from wokeness.")

At more progressive schools, students have an instinct to read texts "to show that there's empire or colonialism or racism," Michael Roth, a liberal-arts scholar and the president of Wesleyan University, said. "To me, that's like shooting fish in a barrel. All you're learning about is your own superiority." But, he added, "I do think it's a mistake to imagine that the Western tradition necessarily leads to the discovery of truth with a capital 'T.' You can only do that if you ignore a lot of the world." Reading storied texts to justify your views as an American or a Christian or an inheritor of the classical tradition—"that also is a way of justifying your own parochialism," he said.

Jackson is leery of the idea that professors might encourage their students to adopt a particular world view. He wants students to inhabit the literary worlds of the authors he teaches. "I try to teach a hermeneutics of charity," he said. "When we read texts, we aren't in an ideological fight with it." Hillsdale, he believes, is "deeply humanistic." The texts are for everyone, equally.

In the past decade, Hillsdale has exported its educational philosophy to K-12 schools across the United States, as part of a larger movement to restore "classical education"—a liberal-arts curriculum designed to cultivate wisdom and teach children to pursue the ancient ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness. Hillsdale has approved eighty schools to use the K-12 curriculum created by the college's professors. Schools that want more intensive help can send their teachers to a summer training session on Hillsdale's campus and consult with college staff. Nearly all of these resources are free.

Hillsdale's K-12 curriculum places a value on civic education. In 2021, the school released the first iteration of its 1776 Curriculum, centered on the nation's founding and history. Grade-school students are given a list of great figures, such as George Washington, Crispus Attucks, and Patrick Henry. Middle schoolers consider a draft of the Declaration of Independence, to see what was added and removed by Congress. High-school students are asked to read speeches and debates by Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, along with a speech by Alexander Stephens, the Vice-President of the Confederacy. The curriculum refers teachers of all grade levels to Hillsdale College's relevant online courses, and to books such as "Land of Hope," by the historian Wilfred McClay, which was written to counter what McClay describes as the "radical," "one-sided" narratives of texts that are commonly used in classrooms today, such as Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States." (Arnn recently hired McClay.)

Hillsdale makes the K-12 curriculum available to educators to use independently, but the results have been uneven. In South Dakota, an emeritus politics professor at Hillsdale, William Morrisey, facilitated a committee that used the college's materials to revise the state's social-

studies standards. They were criticized by the American Historical Association as "excessively long and detailed in their prescriptions, yet totally inadequate in their vision of what history learning entails," omitting "any and all forms of historical inquiry in favor of rote memorization."

The 1776 Curriculum includes many references to slavery, racism, nativism, and oppression. But these passages have a certain inflection. Elementary-school teachers are instructed to explain, for instance, that "America is and always has been a land of immigrants," including those "considered the indigenous or 'native' peoples of both North and South America," who "likely migrated from northeast Asia." John Brown's raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry was evidence of a "breakdown in civil dialogue." In the middle-school and high-school material, racism is described as "the voluntary acts of individual people."

The 1776 Curriculum has become intertwined, in many people's minds, with Trump's 1776 Commission, given their similar names, shared aims, and mutual connection to Larry Arnn. And conservative politicians have eagerly latched on to the school's work. DeSantis has noted that "classical academies are flourishing in the state of Florida. We hope to have many more." (The state currently has at least nine Hillsdale-affiliated schools.) Kari Lake, a Republican who ran for governor in Arizona in 2022, said on the stump, "I believe in the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum."

Last year, Bill Lee, the Republican governor of Tennessee, announced a plan to launch Hillsdale-affiliated charter schools across the state, calling Hillsdale "the standard-bearer in quality curriculum and the responsibility of preserving American liberty." A few months later, Hillsdale hosted a reception in Williamson County, a wealthy area south of Nashville. At the event, Arnn described the sorry state of American schools. "The administrators you hire are all diversity people," he said. "And that helps you, by the way, with your federal requirements—that you have a certain number by color." Later, in a conversation with Lee, Arnn proclaimed that "teachers are trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country." Lee took a drink from his water bottle and said nothing.

NewsChannel 5, a TV station in Nashville, aired a "hidden-camera video" of the event and ran at least two dozen follow-up segments on Hillsdale, speculating about its ideological motivations. A Johnson City pastor wrote an op-ed in his local paper accusing Hillsdale of promoting Christian nationalism. (When I asked Arnn about this, he said that Christianity is premised on the freedom of religious faith, which is separate from the laws of the land. "That means there's no such thing as Christian nationalism," he said. "Couldn't be.") A local teachers' union sent out mailers with Arnn's face Photoshopped onto the body of a man wearing a straw boater and a red-and-white striped suit jacket, holding a clear bottle labelled "charter snake oil." Arnn attempted to clarify in an op-ed in the *Tennessean*. "Dumb can mean 'unintelligent,' which I did not mean," he wrote. "Dumb also means 'ill-conceived' or 'misdirected.' "

Just one Hillsdale-aligned charter school had already opened in Tennessee, but it announced that it was parting ways with the college. A charter-management organization attempted to open three others that would have used Hillsdale's curriculum, but the applications failed; it later withdrew from an appeals process. (The organization is trying again for the fall of 2024.)

Arnn's daughter, Kathleen O'Toole, the college's assistant provost for K-12 education, insisted that the project is "not narrowly political or partisan." When it comes to American history, "we should study the things that are embarrassing to us, and the things that are shameful," she said. "But we shouldn't forget that there are also moments to be proud of." As for Arnn, he does not regret what he said about teachers. He believes that teachers should be "symbols of wisdom" who are experts in their subject matter, not just in the skills of teaching, which he thinks education schools overemphasize. "I think it deprives teachers of something and students of something," he said. "We're trying to program them."

The whole episode illustrates the way in which Hillsdale's politics—and Arnn's uncensored style—have complicated the school's attempt to foster a broad revival of liberal-arts education. Even other players in the classical-school movement have hesitations about Hillsdale. Robert Jackson, the executive director of the Great Hearts Institute, a network for classical-school leaders, told me that Hillsdale envisions "a more distinct political identity" for its schools than other classical schools do—and there are hundreds of others, religious and secular, private and public. While he respects people who work at Hillsdale, the school's high-profile role in the movement "potentially positions classical education as a partisan project," Jackson said. "We do not want to throw students into a kind of partisan affair as a result of their education."

Another friend of Arnn's, neither cousin nor Arkansan, is the former Vice-President Mike Pence. They spoke "a fair amount" while Pence was in the White House, Arnn said. I asked him whether Pence had called him in the days leading up to January 6th, seeking advice on certifying the election. Arnn paused. "I think it would be indiscreet for me to answer that question," he said. "Let me say that I thought, on that day, the election had been over for a month." He went on, "I think the election was fishy, changing the laws in big ways on the eve of the election. But it's done now." Arnn called the issue of the supposedly stolen election a prudential question—one about which people of shared values might disagree, in good faith. He has designed Hillsdale as a refuge from such subjects. And yet the very purpose of a liberal-arts education is to develop the wisdom to see clearly in upside-down days—to separate contemporary ferment from foundational truths when it really matters.

This past fall, Hillsdale launched the next phase of its K-12 initiative: a graduate school of classical education that will train the future leaders of the movement—headmasters, teachers, deans. The eleven students in the graduate school's inaugural cohort sat at a long table on their first day of class. Nine were returning Hillsdale alumni. Whalen, the former provost, was teaching a course called Humane Letters, focussed on texts that "touch the hem of the garment of what is universally human." The students listened as Whalen read them poetry, about wintry fields and stately ships and beauty for its own sake. A ceiling-high window gave a view of the trees. If you closed your eyes, the classroom felt a bit like a cathedral.

Hillsdale is constructing a new building to house the graduate school, which Arnn is hoping to expand next year. Along the Liberty Walk, it will run from Reagan to Thatcher. ♦

An earlier version of this article included an incorrect transcription of a word from a speech at Hillsdale's convocation.

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