

Reason Foundation 50th Gala
Remarks by Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.

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Somehow this wound up a big year for anniversaries. Our university's 150th; our alumnus' Neil Armstrong's moon landing's 50th; my wife and I hit #40; and now this great mile marker for my favorite think tank. Please know I'm not just being ingratiating; nothing else I can think of would get me to leave hearth and home for Los Angeles on a Saturday night. Unless it was a Dodgers game.

When your kind invitation arrived, I had that familiar reaction: "Who cancelled?" Surely there are a number of people to whom this genuine honor might more fittingly have been extended.

Perhaps it's because I have been not just an avid student but an occasional practitioner of the policy prescriptions Reason has innovated over the years. Of all the accolades that my home state garnered during the years of my public service, none was more gratifying to me than Indiana's rating as the third freest state. Largely through aggressive employment of Reason's privatization proposals, Indiana now has the fewest state employees per capita in the country.

Our ranking, by CNBC among others, as having the nation's best infrastructure traces directly to this organization's decades of excellence in imaginative transportation policy. We built P3 toll bridges, and one entirely private bridge. By leasing an existing toll road, we harvested nearly \$4 billion for reinvestments that resurfaced half the state's highway miles, rebuilt 1/3 of its bridges, and constructed over 200 new projects, many of which had been languishing in the nether world of unkept government promises for decades. They haven't named any of them for Bob Poole yet, but one day someone should, because that's where we got the ideas.

And, in 2011, on one of the happiest days of all, we passed sweeping education reforms that included the nation's first universal, statewide voucher program. Here, too, we called on Reason Foundation experts and their scholarship. How I wish Milton Friedman, who dedicated his own personal foundation to this specific purpose, had been there to see it. In one of life's most important decisions, the education of one's children, all Hoosier families are now truly "free to choose."

So whatever and whoever was behind tonight's opportunity, I'm deeply grateful. It's uplifting to be among friends who place primacy on individual dignity and autonomy. Some days it feels as though staunch friends of freedom are getting harder to find.

It's a night for remembrance and celebration, not warnings and discouragement, but this wonderful organization has always looked forward not back, and followed facts and reality where they appeared to lead. To me, today's realities suggest that liberty may be more, not less jeopardized than in the years now past, and thus that Reason and its allies will be more not less essential in the next half century.

I now inhabit that sector of our society where once-sacred freedoms are suddenly at risk. Where some speech is forbidden, some silenced by intimidation, some virtually compelled. Where due process and the presumption of innocence are often discarded, with gross injustice a frequent consequence. Where

tomorrow's Americans finish their formal education abysmally ignorant or misled about our history, the rationale for our free institutions, or the superior morality they embody.

Boone Pickens says "the first billion is the hardest." I'm tempted to speculate that, in the modern-day defense of freedom, the first fifty years are the easiest. That would have seemed absurd in the depths of the Cold War, when two totalitarian governments between them enslaved hundreds of millions, and pledged themselves to bury the West and its effete institutions.

It would have seemed even further-fetched just a couple decades ago when, with one of those regimes on history's ash heap and the other discovering the wonders of capitalism, we all read that history had come to its end, with the full and final triumph of liberal democracy and free market economics.

Oops.

It's not as though bossiness ever went entirely out of fashion. We've always had those among us who, as someone once said, don't care what you do as long as it's compulsory. But lately one gets nostalgic for the good old days when the worst threats to liberty came from our Benevolent Betters, those loving paternalists who dedicate themselves to protecting us against picking the wrong light bulbs, the wrong insurance policies, those dangerous soft drinks and deadly plastic straws, or unregulated lemonade stands.

In the two brief decades since freedom declared victory, new threats have emerged which are arguably more, not less menacing than those against which Reason has contended its first half century. Looking back, the Cold War did of course present the danger of nuclear holocaust, but there was no chance that a sclerotic 20th Century totalitarianism would ever overtake, let alone "bury" nations where human ambition and innovation were free to flourish. It was communism, not capitalism, which contained within it the "seeds of its own destruction."

I'm not sure that can be said of a hybridized system that takes advantage of freedom's economic power, while using breakthrough technologies to tighten the bonds of statist control on the political and social lives of its subjects. If Stalin, in one historian's memorable phrase, was "Genghis Khan with a telephone" then we must hope President Xi or a successor does not turn out to be Mao with an algorithm.

Further away, but if anything more frightening, lies the specter of a world so automated that our own inventions render millions of us superfluous, idle, docile, and ripe for supervision by the masters of that new universe, or even by the inventions themselves.

But maybe the most ominous, and certainly the most clear and present danger, lies in a poisonous domestic politics that incites authoritarian impulses not just on the Left, where they come naturally, but also reactively on what has historically been the pro-freedom Right.

Not only on college campuses but across society at large, tolerance for intolerance has spread like a computer virus. The brilliant comedian George Carlin got a lot of laughs but also broke a lot of barriers when he catalogued the "seven words you can't say on television." Today, you can hear those words and much worse all over television, but there is a new verboten vocabulary of others, a single utterance of which will end a career, even years after the event, at the hands of linguistic lynch mobs.

In my hometown recently, a longtime radio personality met his professional end for repeating a joke with today's most forbidden word in it. No surprise; that has come to be expected. Then, after he

identified the person from whom he thinks he had heard the joke years before, that person also was exiled to PC purgatory. But the mob's lust was not sated. The second party's son, a professional race car driver, who had never even heard let alone told the joke, became a collateral casualty when a cowardly corporation pulled its sponsorship of his car rather than risk social media sliming.

A contest between "live and let live" and "Do it my way or else" is what we call asymmetrical combat. Those devoted to the liberal tradition defend the free expression of even their most radical opponents, and seek to contest arguments on the basis of – what else? – reason.

By contrast, people who see their adversaries not as errant in their thinking but as evil in their souls will not hesitate to employ the power of government, if they can seize it, to enforce their version of cultural virtue on the sinners around them. And since that authoritarian temptation most often coexists with a statist view of economics, limits on permissible speech and thought will inevitably be accompanied by new infringements of the right of free exchange. Liberty looks to need a heavy dose of eternal vigilance these next few years.

A few years back, I wrote a book in which, while expressing deep concern about our national fiscal future, I was obstinately optimistic about the capacity of Americans to govern ourselves. In particular, to grasp and rally around changes that halt the current plunder of the next generation, the economic decline if not ruin of the country, and the loss of sovereignty and autonomy that hopeless indebtedness brings with it. And to opt for policies premised on individual human dignity and responsibility, not condescension and the cultivation of remora-like dependency.

I ventured the thought that the great untested theme in our politics is "These folks don't think you can cut it, but we do." As a banner for this set of ideas, I suggested bending a then-prominent slogan into "Change that believes in you." To appeal to our fellow citizens as completely equal adults, fully capable of making all the important decisions about their own lives and about the nation's future. This was not a fantasy case for abandoning all programs of mutual assistance. Reasonable income transfer programs are almost universally supported and here to stay, but they need not bring with them patronizing, demeaning supervision.

I've not met many people who welcome the idea that they are ignorant, gullible incompetents who need their Benevolent Betters to supervise and shepherd them through life. Nor many who would knowingly exploit their own children and other younger Americans by borrowing enormous, unrepayable amounts of money and spending it on their own current consumption rather than investments in the nation's future.

But I've been forced to ask myself lately if I'd write the same book today. While clinging to an optimism about the innate character of the American people, I confess that for now that conviction is more faith than fact. I cannot cite a single public opinion survey that reveals a will to the self-reliance and mature self-governance that true liberty requires to survive. If there is an actor on today's public stage who speaks in this fashion, I haven't caught his or her act. But America has always produced such leaders, and I have to believe in time she will again.

When they do, ultimately, their wisest, probably Reason Foundation-inspired policy prescriptions will be secondary to a more fundamental societal decision through which they must guide us.

Above all others, or maybe I should say comprising all others, the question Americans must answer in the next few years is “What kind of people will we be?” Resolute advocates of liberty, or acquiescent helots submissive to the orders of others? Respecters of each other’s values, privacy, and personhood, or mini-dictators determined to enforce our worldview on the sub-humans around us? Creatures of dignity, or objects of therapy?

Nations bound by ethnicity, or tribalism, or a common religion have no trouble defining their identity. Typically, it has been defined for them, by history or by whatever tyrant holds sway at the time. This unique nation, bound solely by the historically novel ideal of individual liberty and the self-government of civic equals, cannot, as the man said, “long endure” without a common definition of its citizens’ roles and personhood.

The lyricist stated the principle in nine words: “Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” When the Founders spoke of “ordered liberty” they knew that a people that would preserve order for themselves must first resolve to live free, self-disciplined lives, then insist on a rule of law and not of men subject to the tyrant’s temptation.

At Purdue’s commencement ceremonies, over which the poor schmo with my job presides, the climax is the conferral of the degrees which, at our university at least, students have worked very hard to earn. The boilerplate language includes the phrase “with all the rights, privileges, duties, and responsibilities of that degree.” I always enunciate the last two nouns of the series more clearly and loudly.

In more than one commencement address, I have gone further, and drawn the audience’s attention directly to those words in advance. “We live in an age” I have observed “when people are quick to demand what they claim are their rights and privileges, but far less often recognize any attendant duties or responsibilities.” I have followed that observation with a call to protect our freedoms through lives that are active civically and responsible personally.

Joseph Sobran once mused “How is it that every time someone asserts a new right the rest of us wind up less free?” We await new leadership, and new generations, that by both action and individual example revives and fortifies the premises on which authentic freedom depends.

Except that this great organization has never waited. You have with nearly unique persistence and fidelity to principle upheld our liberties, constantly innovating and advocating measures to guard and extend them. Unless my worries are misplaced, your vigilance, grasp of technology, and intellectual courage will be needed more than ever in the free nation I dream of my grandchildren inheriting.

On perhaps the most memorable single evening of my working life, as I thanked the people of Indiana for giving us the chance to bring major change to our state, I finished by saying “When the music stops and the last confetti falls, get a good rest. Get your courage up and your game face on, because the real work starts tomorrow.”

I know no such counsel is needed here. Reason Foundation has always looked to tomorrow, and with you on freedom’s ramparts America’s tomorrows will always dawn brightly.

Congratulations and good evening.

