Hutchins 40th Anniversary Brief Address

Tony Mountain

It is wonderful to see you and I want to thank you all for coming. I have to say that the one person I miss most is our founder, Warren Olson. He died this month; he almost made it. He was not only a great personal friend to me but he gave us the Hutchins School and he gave me a wonderful career that is now in its 39th year. I miss him.

My career has been, of course, in a program dedicated to the liberal arts. I mention the term 'liberal arts' because I heard the liberal arts referred to recently. This fall at the faculty, staff, and administration convocation, a member of the administration made reference to the liberal arts education and in the same breath, as I remember, he used the term "elitist" and added a reminder that while such an education may be all well and good, we need to be "realistic" here. Is Hutchins "elitist" and "unrealistic?"

In one sense it's hopeless to respond to the term "elitist." It has been used and abused for a long time now but like all biased terms it survives regardless of any sharp rebuttal. It reflects the classism that exists and will continue to exist in our thinking about American education.

Still, the term points to one side of the old American debate, the one that has been with us since the beginning, the debate about who and what we are. Whether the discussion be about politics, economics, cultural matters, foreign relations, education or almost whatever, the sides line up in the old familiar way. In terms of education – and at the risk of over-generalization – one side might be put this way:

American education should be practical and pragmatic, teaching what is useful and applied. In this sense, education should address areas of knowledge and practice that directly result in students becoming productive members of society. From a political viewpoint, this side is a descendant of the great promise of America: that this country offers opportunities for material advancement and the freedom (often from government interference) for individuals to advance themselves. Education should give them the tools to do so.

The other view of education – I'm not sure what to call it, maybe "Jeffersonian" will have to do – wants to stress that education is not simply about training and skills, but concerns itself with the mind, with thinking. This view of education is mindful of the kind of democracy we have chosen for ourselves – a democracy built on the principle of the sovereignty of the people. As such, this view of education is concerned not just with skills and knowledge useful to people as they try to get ahead, but with our political,

social, and economic commons; it reflects, if I may use a cliché, the idea that we are all responsible and that we are all in this together.

The unfortunate part about this division is that it exists at all; is that there is so little recognition of the porousness of the walls that divide the sides. Of course education should be practical and technical, and practiced with an eye to employment and financial success; nothing, in fact, is going to change that. But such concerns do not rule out, one dearly hopes (for the continuance of our country), the necessity for developing citizenship.

It's that last item that I'm particularly concerned about these days. Of particular interest to the "Jeffersonian" (if not "elitist") view of education is thinking itself, specifically critical thinking and the development of critical judgment. If our brand of democracy – a democracy in which the people are sovereign – is to continue, what could be more realistic than this concern about the quality of our public dialogue on all the issues we hold in common?

Some of you – perhaps many of you – have read the work of the Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff, or heard him speak. Using recent brain research, Lakoff has tried to explain exactly how appeals to our emotions are so influential on us: the brain responds immediately to emotion and only secondarily are other kinds of cognition – e.g., reasoning – brought into play. Of course advertisers – and the entire public relations industry – have known this for along time, with the result that we have become used to being appealed to by way of emotional claims which have no rational support at all. "Coke refreshed you best." "One of the most civilized places on earth. Land Rover." "Take a global perspective. Develop global opportunity. 6 continents. 1 airline. Delta." "Be patriotic: eat American fries." Winning the Nobel Piece prize "was an attempt by the elites in the world to encourage Obama to emasculate the United States" (Chronicle, 9/10).

As Lakoff points out, appeals to emotion, while they are not rational arguments, have great persuasive power. There has, of course, always been some of this, but Lakoff is appalled by the extent of its presence in our public dialogues concerning matters we must *rationally* discuss together if we are to do our local, state, and national business. If we don't do this, we could lose it all. (In my opinion, we have already experienced that once. One would think that the prospect of going to war and invading another country would spark intense national debate, and if the people are sovereign than that debate would have results. What happened in the run-up to the Iraq war? There seemed to be more spirited (and rather unreported) response outside than inside the country. It was as if what the people said was

irrelevant because a handful of people (only two of whom were elected) were going to have their way. (And how rational was *their* decision making?) Was this democracy?)

Irrational non-arguments about the public's business abound. Years ago when George Bush Sr. was president, at a press conference he was asked about, I think, some piece of legislation that had liberal support. In response to the question he said, "Oh please, don't make me say the 'L' word." I dismissed his comment at the time but later I had the creepy feeling that he had successfully trashed a word that had a long and distinguished history behind it. Recently, reading reports of town hall meeting debates about reforming health care, I learned that President Obama is a communist and fascist all at once. That's quite a trick. Maybe they settled on some middle ground: "socialist." A recent governor of a state north of here attacked a House health reform bill, saying it would create – I'm not sure of her term – something like "death squads" or some such in hospitals. She was referring to a paragraph in the proposed legislation which states that when a doctor or hospital representative meets with a bereaved family of a terminally ill Medicare patient, that doctor or health care worker should be paid for his or her time – it's not a volunteer activity. The paragraph had simply been lifted from the Medicare law and placed in the proposed legislation; but after the storm which erupted over "death squads," it was stripped out. This is scary.

It seems to me not just realistic but crucial that we pay attention to our thinking if we wish to preserve our democracy. Do we wish a kind of Brave New World in which we voluntarily sink into the soma of media consumerism and willingly give away our sovereignty? A simple way to do that is to accept the message that in one form or another is continually given to us, that thinking really *is* unpleasant labor. But we don't have to do this any more than we have to tolerate the brand of tyranny practiced before the run-up of the Iraq war. I don't think we need to accept any of this, nor does the curriculum and pedagogical practices of the Hutchins School. The Hutchins School addresses so many, many issues and all of them are informed by a concern with thinking critically and developing a critical judgment.

I'm not going into detail on this because Les may address it tonight, but I'll mention that our school is, of course, named after Robert Maynard Hutchins. Now there's a man who must have known something about "elitist" education. After being the dean of the Yale Law School, he became Chancellor of the University of Chicago and he is associated with the Great Books program. Whether we agree with him or not, he became convinced that getting students to engage directly with the best (in someone's opinion)

that's been thought and written in the past, something important would happen to a students' minds: they would think, decide, and act more thoughtfully, more deliberately, more reasonably. They would, that is, be more effective citizens. Just as important, Hutchins thought this form of education should be available to everyone, not an "elitist" few.

Warren named our school after Hutchins because he too believed that everything depended on the best critical judgment we could muster, and the development of that by way of direct participation should be available to everyone. What could speak more realistically to our community, our country, or the global village we live in now? There's nothing "elitist" about this. There should be thousands of Hutchins programs around the country and all through our public school system. We're talking about the well-being of everything we have in common here.

And so I want to thank Warren for starting this program and for being who he was for me all those years; and I want to thank all the wonderful colleagues with whom I've had the privilege of working, and I particularly want to thank you all for being part of the Hutchins community. Thank you.