



1. *A Dynamic Conversation Between Rices*
2. *Reflections on “College”*

A Dynamic Conversation Between Rices

By GRANT KIEFABER
STAFF WRITER

In last week’s “Common Ground” dialogue, Condoleezza Rice and Susan Rice disagreed on relations with Iran, but both said their parents instilled the need to be twice as good as everyone else in order to succeed. There was no comparison between the Common Ground event last fall, featuring Karl Rove and David Axelrod, and this one. The international affairs experts were not afraid to speak their minds, and that dynamic made their discussion interesting and engaging.

Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former National Security Advisor Susan Rice covered a range of topics in U.S. foreign policy.

of the Common Ground event held last semester: while they discussed, unfortunately they didn’t truly debate. Despite that, they seemed far less scripted than Rove and Axelrod.

Having had the pleasure of speaking with Axelrod and Rove beforehand, I noticed that they repeated certain phrases on the stage, making them seem scripted. This was also the feeling of many other students who attended. Axelrod and Rove had already planned what they wanted to say, and they stuck with it. This led to a relatively boring event.

Both Rices broke from this approach when it came to the topic of the Iran Deal. They had differing opinions and were not afraid to share them. They also brought their personal experiences into their analysis and debate. This is an example that Hamilton students should strive to emulate—as opposed to simply stating facts from our favorite news sources.

Condoleezza Rice came out in stark opposition, while Susan Rice, who had been closely involved in the deal, supported it. Condoleezza Rice thought the agreement with Iran would not make a difference in the long run. Susan Rice defended it by saying that its purpose was simply to stop the Iranians from becoming a nuclear power; that the deal was not meant to solve issues such as state-sponsored terrorism, but to work to prevent the development of a nuclear weapon from complicating other issues involving Iran. Condoleezza Rice responded by saying

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the deal wouldn’t even stop Iran from eventually acquiring a nuclear weapon.

With two national security heavyweights, the topic of Russia was unavoidable. Both agreed that Russia is a declining power, and that this makes relations with it all the more volatile. Their responses to the Russian problem differed. Condoleezza Rice used language that suggested a more hawkish view. She emphasized that aggression toward Russia is unnecessary however because it understands that the United States has the capabilities to “turn Moscow into a parking lot.” Susan Rice focused more on the future and the changing attitudes in Russia, especially among its youth. Both admitted the validity of each other’s views, playing to the theme of the event and series—common ground.

A question posed by a Hamilton student forced the guests to break away from national security and speak about their personal lives. They were asked what impact their race and gender had on their careers. Condoleezza responded by talking about her childhood and upbringing, remarking that she was taught to be twice as good just so she could be considered equal. Susan made this point as well. They both spoke to the issue of prejudice. They made it clear that prejudiced views they had encountered were not something they considered their problem, but rather the problem of the people holding such views. Their answers gave insight into the tough and resilient nature of these women, something we all should learn from.

From all accounts, the audience thoroughly enjoyed the discussion. Bringing two guests who in some cases held opposing views, and voiced them, created an environment that spurred debate on campus. The administration should continue to bring speakers who are willing to debate hot-topic issues rather than simply read a script. Condoleezza Rice and Susan Rice provided a thrilling debate-like discussion that engaged the crowd and clearly fit the purpose of the Common Ground series.

Reflections on “College”

By DR. DAVID FRISK
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

As the end of another semester looms, students focus so intently on term projects and grades that they can forget the big picture—their four-year college educations—at a moment when it’s important not to. What matters most, in the next few weeks and in general at Hamilton, is how hard you try (including how hard you think) and what you learn. Both should be preoccupations, even obsessions. Grades should not be, and they might turn out better on the whole if they aren’t.

It means something, I think, that the term “undergraduate” or “undergrad” seems to have replaced the culturally richer word “college” as a description of the years between high school and adult life. “College” signifies a challenging and inspiring superiority to high school. “Undergraduate” suggests a kind of inferiority to what comes later. Which term is a source of pride? Which is more exciting?

“I am in college” connotes distinction and responsibility. It means adulthood, albeit an early adulthood, characterized by a concentrated attempt at intellectual

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maturity—a time of life that’s exempt, at least if one is fortunate enough to be a full-time student, from many other aspects of adult life and its burdens. “I’m an undergrad,” in contrast, means “I am in between high school and the real world (work or professional education) and attending a college or university.” It is also a neutral and factual statement about age—I’m 18 to 22, not 15 or 25—rather than a claim to partial adulthood, since it says nothing about what this age should be like.

These reflections are prompted by three things I experienced last weekend: reading a classic commentary on higher

continued on back

education, hearing an impressive talk on that topic by a professor of philosophy, and overhearing a rigorous philosophical conversation (friendly, largely impersonal, most of it rather loud) between a young man whom I took to be a recent Hamilton graduate and an older man who was likely a former professor of his, or at any rate an intellectual mentor.

The recent student clearly remains "into" the life of the mind—which cannot be taken for granted in any college graduate of any age, and is thus especially good to see and hear. The conversation didn't mainly involve education, but included one striking remark about it. The young man said that with Hamilton playing "perennial parent" in its students' lives, they found it difficult to forgo, to deny themselves, such comfortable protection. He seemed to regret this dynamic, and I didn't get the impression he had generally acquiesced in, as he saw it, such constant parenting. If he'd done so at Hamilton, it is fair to ask whether his conversation would have been as intellectually strong, as logically sound, as it was.

By "parenting," I do not mean close, custodial attention to genuine mental health issues. To the contrary—the administration should, for example, take the recent letter from aggrieved parents Stewart and Gina Burton most seriously. Rather, the issue is extreme sensitivity to the discomforts involved in truly free intellectual exploration. There is a tradeoff between intellectual adulthood and family-like levels of adult solicitude—just as there is a tradeoff between the stressfully un leisured condition of full-fledged adulthood, after college, and continued intellectual growth. In each case there is a problem or, if you prefer, a difficult challenge. Like it or not, these things are in tension with each other.

I had witnessed a good example—and exemplar—of pure education the night before, in an after-dinner talk by a philosophy professor named James Muir from the University of Winnipeg

(D. Phil., Oxford). Rotund and heavily bearded, casually dressed but focused like a laser, he took his time, and while open toward and highly engaged with the audience consisting mostly of students, was not to be trifled with. I imagine, to put it another way, that he mentally stretched every one of us in the room. His talk was titled "Intellectual Diversity as a Means to Freedom of Thought: Lessons from Logic and the History of Ideas." It was a learned, intellectually rigorous, and thorough yet even-tempered attack on the pseudo-intellectual origins of censorship and PC name-calling on campuses, and on their motivations. But the highest purpose in denouncing these sinister plagues is to advance a positive idea of what higher education actually is, and Professor Muir provided compelling glimpses of one.

The evening was, if you're curious, part of the Alexander Hamilton Institute's Annual Undergraduate Conference on the American Polity. Held this year and last at nearby Colgate University and before that at Skidmore College with the participation of friendly faculty, it consists of a day of student presentations—the topics range widely—and scholars' comments on them, plus a keynote address the first night and a more classroom-like talk by a guest scholar the second night. The latter is followed by a discussion of an assigned reading. Based on my now-extensive experience at them, it is no exaggeration to call these conferences a feast of reason.

The latter part of Dr. Muir's comments, melding into something of a dialogue with the students in attendance, was an analysis of our reading, Leo Strauss's great 1959 address "What Is Liberal Education?" My own interpretation of it is not, perhaps, wholly consistent with Muir's. But central to Strauss's remarks—they're not overly long, six single-spaced pages

as a printout—are his clear but brilliant descriptions of the "great books" teaching and learning that he made so famous as a teacher and scholar of political philosophy. The essence of that aspect of the address can be found in these passages:

"We have heard Plato's suggestion that education in the highest sense is philosophy [literally, the love of wisdom]. Philosophy is [a] quest for wisdom or quest for knowledge regarding the most important, the highest, or the most comprehensive things ... But wisdom is inaccessible to man and hence virtue and happiness will always be imperfect. ... We cannot be philosophers but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize. ... liberal education consists in listening to the conversation among the greatest minds. But here we are confronted with the overwhelming difficulty that this conversation does not take place without our help—that in fact we must bring about that conversation. The greatest minds utter monologues. We must transform their monologues into a dialogue ... into a 'together.' ... Since the greatest minds contradict one another regarding the most important matters, they compel us to judge of their monologues; we cannot take on trust what any one of them says. On the other hand we cannot [help] but notice that we are not competent to be judges."

"Liberal education," Strauss continues later, "... is a training in the highest form of modesty, not to say of humility. It is at the same time a training in boldness; it demands from us the complete break with the noise, the rush, the thoughtlessness, the cheapness of the Vanity Fair of the intellectuals as well as of their enemies. ..."

I hope these thoughts are either stimulating or fortifying as you proceed through your late April-early May crunch time, and as you reflect—which you should, even at crunch time—on whatever the year at Hamilton has brought you.

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#RiceCommonGround

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