

Freedom for Excellence

By Professor Robert P. George

October 7, 2005
Washington, DC

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability. Launched in 1995, ACTA has members from over 400 colleges and universities.

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Remarks at the ACTA 10th Anniversary Dinner accepting

**The Philip Merrill Award
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education**

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I cannot begin to tell you how deeply honored I am to receive ACTA's Philip Merrill Award. Mr. Merrill's great and visionary contributions to promoting the study of Western Civilization and American principles make me proud to be the inaugural recipient of the award bearing his name. It shall be my constant endeavor to promote the cause of excellence in arts and letters, as he has done, and to help build on the great things that he, working with Jerry Martin and Anne Neal at ACTA, Steve Balch at the National Association of Scholars, and other leaders in our cause have already accomplished.

It is right that we pause to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. While it is certainly true that much of contemporary academe remains unreformed, and an enormous amount of work still lies before us, it is undeniable that significant inroads have been made. Important victories have been won at leading institutions around the country. Examples have been set. Crimes against intellectual excellence and academic freedom have been exposed. Wrongs have been righted—not in all cases, of course, but in more than a few. Perpetrators have been called to account. Names have been named. Reformers have been emboldened. Obstructors of reform have been shamed. Trustees, alumni, students and their parents, and donors and friends of American colleges and universities have been educated and encouraged to become activists in the cause of higher education reform.

In an astonishing number of cases, ACTA, the NAS, and associated organizations have been in the center of the fight for reform. (Of course, one cannot fail to mention in this regard the outstanding contributions of Alan Kors, Harvey Silverglate, and others at FIRE.) Time and again they have been there to help, to advise, to recruit, to spread the word, to ring the

alarm, to encourage the good guys, and to confront the bad guys. ACTA stands for—and fights for—high academic standards. ACTA stands with—and fights alongside—students and faculty who struggle in their institutions for the maintenance of standards, as well as those who have the temerity to dissent from “politically correct” campus orthodoxies.

So tonight we celebrate ACTA and the great cause of higher education reform for which it fights. But why does it fight? Why do we fight? To what end do we struggle in the face of entrenched power and stubborn resistance? Why are we concerned about the student whose right to express a dissenting opinion is trampled or the thousands of students who are given a degree but denied an education as a result of the “dumbing down” of the curriculum? Why do we care about the assistant professor who is denied tenure because he would not toe the party line on this or that moral, political, or economic question? Whence this determination to fight for academic freedom?

I submit that it is not, or not merely, a passion for freedom for its own sake. We want our young people and those responsible for teaching them to be free from repression or invidious discrimination, but we fight for these freedoms for a reason that goes beyond them. We fight for freedom from oppression because we believe in freedom for excellence. We want the obstacles of political correctness to be removed so that students and scholars can pursue understanding, knowledge, and truth more robustly across the arts and sciences and appropriate the great goods of human intellectual striving more fully into their lives for their benefit and for the sake of the common good. We honor academic freedom as a great and indispensable value because it serves the values of understanding, knowledge, and truth that are greater still.

Although some have depicted freedom and truth as antithetical, in reality they are mutually supportive and, indeed, dependent on each other.

The defense of academic freedom must, implicitly at least, appeal to the concept of truth and any plausible and complete case for academic freedom will present understanding, knowledge, and truth as the intrinsic values and virtues that ground the intelligibility of freedom as something indispensable to their pursuit and meaningful appropriation. On the other side of the question, the overwhelming evidence of history, not to mention the plain evidence under our noses when we examine the contemporary situation in much of the academy, shows that freedom is as necessary to the intellectual life of man as oxygen is to his bodily life. Is a proper freedom boundless? No, of course not—not in the academy or anywhere else. But the scope of freedom, as a value that is ordered to truth, must be generous—especially in the academy where free inquiry, exploration, experimentation, and even speculation are often essential to insight and richer understanding. Even within its legitimate bounds, can academic freedom not be abused? Of course it can be, and all-too-often it is. Academic freedom does not guarantee excellence (or even passable scholarship). Sometimes respect for it insulates abuses from correction. But, again, the lessons of history and our current situation are clear: repression of academic freedom—far from shielding us from error—undermines the very process of truth-seeking.

But someone might say: “There are many truths we know. Why must we permit them to be denied and questioned? Why not take the view that error—or at least clear error—has no rights? Otherwise, doesn’t the defense of academic freedom collapse into the self-stultifying denial of the possibility of truth? Doesn’t it make freedom, rather than truth, the ultimate academic value?”

I have already mentioned that some partisans of academic freedom misguidedly depict truth as an enemy of freedom. They appeal to, or presuppose, a species of relativism or subjectivism or radical skepticism in defending freedom of inquiry. Now, it is certainly true that one reason for

respecting academic freedom is that people can be mistaken about what they regard—even securely regard—as true. Indeed, even unanimity of belief does not guarantee its correctness. But I think that the possibility of error is not the primary or most powerful reason for honoring academic freedom—and protecting it even in areas where we are secure in our knowledge of the truth.

The stronger and deeper reason is that freedom is the condition of our fuller appropriation of the truth. Perhaps you have noticed the stress I have placed on the idea of appropriation of truth in my remarks already. I use the term because knowledge and truth have their value for human beings precisely as fulfillment of capacities for understanding and judgment. The liberal arts are liberating of the human spirit because knowledge of truth—attained by the exercise of our rational faculties—is intrinsically and not merely instrumentally valuable. “Useful knowledge” is, of course, all to the good; and it is wonderful when human knowledge can serve other human goods, such as health, as in the biomedical sciences, or economic efficiency and growth, or the constructing of great buildings and bridges, or any of a million other worthy purposes. But even “useful knowledge” is often more-than-merely instrumentally valuable; and a great deal of knowledge that wouldn’t qualify as “useful” in the instrumental sense is intrinsically and profoundly enriching. This is why we honor—and should honor—and should honor more highly than we currently do honor in our institutions of higher learning—excellence in the humanities and pure science (social and natural).

Knowledge that elevates and enriches—knowledge that liberates the human spirit—cannot be merely notional. It must be appropriated. It is not—it cannot be—merely a matter of affirming or even believing correct propositions. The knowledge that elevates and liberates is knowledge not only that something is the case, but why and how it is the case. And

typically such knowledge does more than merely settle something in one's mind, it opens new avenues of exploration, its pay off includes new sets of questions, new lines of inquiry.

To return, then, to the question: Why respect freedom even where truth is known securely? I answer in the tradition of Socrates and, as Michael Novak would remind us, also the Second Vatican Council in its great Declaration on Religious Freedom: It is because freedom—freedom to inquire, freedom to assent or withhold assent as one's best judgment dictates—is a condition of the personal appropriation of the truth by the human subject—the human person—for the sake of whom—for the flourishing of whom, for the liberation of whom—knowledge of truth is intrinsically valuable. And it is intrinsically valuable not in some free floating or abstract sense, but precisely as an aspect of the well-being and fulfillment of human beings—rational creatures whose flourishing consists in part in intellectual inquiry, understanding, and judgment and in the practice of the virtues which make possible excellence in the intellectual question.

The freedom we defend is freedom for the practice of these virtues. It is freedom for excellence. It is a freedom that, far from being negated by rigorous standards of scholarship, demands them. It is not an “anything goes” freedom, but rather a freedom truly worthy of those who exercise it in the pursuit of truth.

Philip Merrill and ACTA have been exemplary in their dedication to the noble cause of freedom for excellence. That is why I—who should be far down the list of those in line for the Philip Merrill Award—accept it with gratitude and pledge to remain steadfast in the fight for reform being led in so many significant and fruitful ways by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.



Professor Robert P. George



Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton, is the founder and director of the innovative and widely-acclaimed James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton and holds the chair once held by President Woodrow Wilson.

The Madison Program is a campus center for promoting an understanding of the principles on which this country is based and the institutions that preserve and protect those principles. It is serving as an inspiration and national model for institutions seeking to elevate the standard of civic education.

Professor George holds the most distinguished position in constitutional law in the field of political science in America. He is an expert on the natural law tradition in moral and constitutional philosophy, and his books and articles have shaped the debate in this field.

His publications include *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (1993) and *In Defense of Natural Law* (1999), both published by Oxford University Press. He is editor of *Great Cases in Constitutional Law* (2000) and *Constitutional Politics: Essays on Constitution Making, Maintenance, and Change* (2001), from Princeton University Press. He is also general editor of New Forum Books, a Princeton University Press series of interdisciplinary works in law, culture, and politics.

A graduate of Swarthmore College and Harvard Law School, Professor George earned a doctorate in philosophy of law from Oxford University. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at Swarthmore and received a Knox Fellowship from Harvard for graduate study in law and philosophy at Oxford.

The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education



The Philip Merrill Award honors individuals who have made an extraordinary contribution to the advancement of liberal arts education, core curricula, and the teaching of Western civilization and American history. It offers a unique tribute to those dedicated to the transmission of the great ideas and central values of our civilization

and is presented to inspire others and provide public acknowledgment of the value of their endeavors. The Award is made on the recommendation of a distinguished selection committee, and it highlights ACTA's efforts to promote and encourage a strong liberal arts education.

The Award is named in honor of Philip Merrill, a distinguished public servant, publisher, entrepreneur, and philanthropist who has tirelessly supported and affirmed the importance of academic excellence and a common core of learning in a free society. Mr. Merrill has served as a trustee of Cornell University, the University of Maryland Foundation, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. He is also an *emeritus* member of the National Council of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

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1726 M Street, NW, Suite 802 • Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 1-888-ALUMNI-8 or 202-467-6787 • Fax: 202-467-6784

Email: info@goacta.org • Website: www.goacta.org