

Michael Poliakoff:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and with me is ACTA's Chief of Staff, Armand Alacbay. Among his other achievements, he is a graduate of the Scalia School of Law, which brings us to our very special guest today, which is Attorney General Edwin Meese, who among other connections to us was Rector of the Board of Visitors of George Mason University. Attorney General Meese has been a figure in the history of the United States, I should also say with gratitude a major figure in the history of ACTA, having served on our Board of Directors from 2007 to 2019. But, his service first as Chief of Staff for Governor Ronald Reagan and then Attorney General under President Ronald Reagan were pivotal moments in the history of our nation. He's also holder of the Heritage Center for Legal and Judicial Studies Chair, and holder of the Ronald Reagan Chair in public policy at the Heritage Foundation.

These are enormous achievements that put Attorney General Meese at the very intersection of those moments when American policy and American values have been shaped. With that, I want to ask our very special guest, a very broad and leading question, what gives you the most hope for America's future? I have to do the mirror image of that, what causes you the greatest amount of worry as you look back on our history and look forward to our future?

Edwin Meese:

It's good to be with you, Michael, and to particularly to have the honor of participating in an activity of ACTA. As you mentioned, I was lucky enough to be on the board for 12 years, but I have been a great admirer of going back to Jerry Martin and Anne Neal and the work that ACTA has done since its inception, and you're carrying on that tradition in an excellent fashion. It's good to be with you here today. To start with, what are my hopes for the future? I would say that it actually is young people. I've had the privilege of not only being on the ACTA board, but the Board of Visitors at George Mason. By the way, that Board of Visitors and Rector are terms that probably go all the way back to even before the country was founded and was borrowed from the English traditions, they have no religious significance as the term might otherwise imply.

But I've also had the privilege of serving on the board at West Point, the United States Military Academy, and on the board of two organizations, the Junior Statesman Foundation, which deals primarily with high school students, and the Young America's Foundation, which is currently very active for teaching young people at both the high school and the college level, emphasizing concepts like patriotism, loyalty, and excellence in education, those kinds of concepts, which in those positions I've held, I was able to see the bright, young people and the great opportunity there is that they hold for the future. I also think the fact that we have organizations like those that I mentioned are themselves, along with ACTA and others, creating the conditions under which young people can learn about our traditions, the history of our country, the reasons for American exceptionalism.

Obviously like any group of people, they're human, we've made mistakes in our country, but we've also done a very good job of correcting those mistakes and the things that have happened. For example, going all the way back to the Civil War and ultimately the changes in the basic foundations of our government, equality under the law and the other kinds of ways in which we've allowed to have an equal opportunity for everyone in the country. I think the fact that we have both bright, young people and also we have organizations that are seeking to give them a complete education, particularly in education in the customs history and values of the United States. On the other hand, what are my greatest worries? My greatest worries right now is that so many of our institutions, including education, and I'll come back to that in a moment, are often trying to promote ideas like socialism, Marxism, and

are distorting the views of our history and other ways in which they're trying to move our young people in a left direction.

The leftist extremists that have control of three major influencers of public opinion, one of which is education of all sorts, a second is the media, the news media but also the information media such as films and video, and thirdly, actually in many ways religious institutions in the country, all of whom are trying to point young people in the wrong direction, in a direction which is totally at odds. As a result, they are getting a distorted view in many of the teachings and programs that these institutions have unfortunately used as their themes and their direction of the information that they put forward. I think that really how we deal with young people, the kind of education they receive and the fact that we teach them in these institutions, particularly institutions of higher education should be teaching them how to think, not what to think.

Michael Poliakoff:

You did something quite remarkable when you were Rector of the George Mason University Board of Visitors, which was to get a requirement on the books for undergraduates to study American history. That, of course, is something that ACTA has been laboring at over the past... How much is it now? 26 years, trying to convince higher education that it is malfeasance to send a young person out into the world without understanding the nation. For the benefit of trustees all around the country, I hope many of them sharing that ambition to make sure their students understand America's history and government, how did you do this? Could you share the story of how this happened?

Edwin Meese:

Well, I was very fortunate in being part of a group that formed the Board of Visitors at George Mason, and that was that we had people at pretty much a like mind as to what ought to go into education. Having seen some institutions, such as Hillsdale College in Michigan and others that have really adopted the right attitude, I felt that, as did other members of the Board of Visitors, that it was part of our role as essentially trustees of the institution to be sure that students received what I would call a total education. That it would be an education, as I say, that would teach them how to think and also to have the information of what was the truth about our history, about our customs, and about the basic pillars of government and society generally, so that they could do the kind of job that has been traditional in the way in which education served this country for so many years, including during the time that I was in college, in graduate school.

I also felt myself, having had the privilege of being a law professor for a number of years and having taught in three or four institutions, that we had a responsibility. I had worked as a member of the faculty, I had been a leader in some faculty activities, and now I felt that I had the same kind of understanding of what the role of a faculty is. As we looked at this, the Board of Visitors really at George Mason just felt that this was an important role that we had to play, and that was to set the educational policy. Now, this is different from setting the curriculum. Curriculum, to me, was a joint project of the Board of Directors, Board of Visitors, and the faculty that we all were in this together to have a total participation of all aspects of the institution.

I'd like to make a distinction here, and that is academic policy was what the total operation of a higher education institution performed, whereas curriculum, for example, how in detail, what's going to be taught, how it's going to be taught, what textbooks are going to be used and so on, that's really a responsibility of the faculty. But the overall policy as to what should an educated student know by the time that they graduated, that's a responsibility that the Board of Visitors shares with the faculty to see that goal that I mentioned is accomplished. I think it was the fact that we were quite honest with the

faculty, we had the faculty join us in a lot of the discussions and the formation of the policy. One of the things we did right from the start was to make sure that the faculty itself, through its faculty senate, was a participant in the work of the board. We had a position not as a voting member, but as a regular associate member, you might say, of the Board of Visitors, or the president or a senior representative of the faculty Senate.

That meant that we are not really two groups working in the opposite direction, but that we were all working in the same direction. I think first of all, creating that kind of an atmosphere for discussion, secondly, having a discussion which included both faculty members and the board and then coming to a consensus, if you will, as to what was necessary. While the newspapers tried to play up that this was really something really terrible for us and the faculty was at odds, I don't think we had any real opposition or active opposition when this policy was discussed and ultimately adopted.

Michael Poliakoff:

That is a wonderful and important insight. In my own education career, the term shared governance has so often been used as a way of saying either we will have no governance, in other words, there will be no decision. Or, that it will be our decision shared would simply mean that the visitors, the regents, the trustees need to stay away. You've explained that really quite well that this became a strong and cooperative relationship with the board setting policy and the faculty attending through their expertise to the execution of that in the classroom. But it seems that once you and your colleagues were gone, that entropy took over and chaos began to resurface. Can you talk a little bit about what happened then?

Edwin Meese:

Sure. Well, obviously there were some people in the faculty that disagreed with us and that's why I want to emphasize that while they disagreed, they had their opportunity to be heard, they knew why we were doing it, what we were doing, and there was no lack of cross information between the board and the faculty. But, I think many of the faculty did agree with us. When I say we didn't have any real trouble, it actually... We had some real leaders on the faculty who developed new ways of providing this information. For example, the use of video and other techniques to use modern vehicles and modern means of providing information that was very old, but providing it in an interesting way that would intrigue the students, to themselves be interested in either country did certain things, why certain things happened in our history, and to give a balanced picture of history, for example. All of these were very important.

Now, that doesn't mean there weren't forces within the faculty that wanted to do something different, the old way, the left leaning way. As our board left, we had new members of a 16 member board... We had four new members each year. The members of the board did change, I think you had a different governor ultimately appointed some of them. I might say by the way that the governors that appointed our board, both Governor Allen and Governor Gilmore were very interested and very supportive of higher education. One of the things that each of us who was... Before we were appointed to the board, actually had a long conversation, in my case for example as long as an hour, discussion with the governor as to what his view of higher education was. Fortunately, he had the kind of views that I mentioned earlier about having a whole picture of history and these other topics, and so that in itself helped to set things off in the right direction.

But anyway, I think that it doesn't mean that the potential seeds of misinformation weren't still there when we left. After a while, particularly people who had not had the experience that some of us have had took over changing the faculty, the curriculum, and eliminating this particular requirement.

Armand Alacbay:

Mr. Attorney General, this conversation is a little personal to me. I happened to be one of those graduates from George Mason School of Law, and one thing that always stuck out for me is that my diploma bears your signature as Rector. As a young lawyer, it meant a lot to me to think that you personally endorsed the education that I got when I was in law school. I guess my question is how important was it to you that the Board, or that you personally as Rector, guaranteed the quality of the education that diploma represented?

Edwin Meese:

Well, I as one of the members of the Board, had the same responsibility as all 18, because two of the members of the board were students. But I would say that I think we as a group took a feeling of serious responsibility for the quality and the appropriate type of an education that diploma that you talked about portrayed. I think we felt a responsibility to that. Of course one of the other things was that at George Mason, right from the start that law school has been an excellent school with a much greater balance than most law schools. They taught the rule of law as traditionally come down over the ages and is part of the foundation of our country. The constitutionalism and the rule of law are essential, particularly to the law school, and the school has a reputation of excellence, of intellectual quality, and of a nature of being constitutionally oriented and teaching the law as the law actually reads, not as some law professor might want it to be.

While they can talk in their classes about alternative ways of looking at things, I think a strong backing and a strong foundation of constitutional law, accurate history of the law, and a motivation for students to perpetuate the best qualities of our legal system, which of course is known throughout the world as an excellent system. I think all of those things go into making that diploma of yours not only valuable when you got it, but continuing as a symbol of where a legal education ought to go.

Armand Alacbay:

I'm so thankful for that. If only the 23-year-old version of me appreciated it just as much back then, but certainly that there was a rigor there and it's paid off in spades.

Edwin Meese:

Yes. I might say, by the way, that the fact that the name Antonin Scalia is on the title of the law school in itself says something about the quality of the law school. Historically, one of the finest justices of the court and a justice who proclaimed the importance of accurate portrayal of the law, the constitution, and actually helping students understand in a very balanced way the various aspects that have made our law in this country fair and great. I think that is a good start for any law school, to have that as the symbol and as the objective of the quality that the young lawyers entering the profession really require.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, and that's really a big thing, being faithful to the institutional mission.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes, indeed. I want to bring us back actually to where I started in the introduction. You were a very close advisor to Governor Reagan and then President Reagan who must be, when we consider our leaders, one of the most values driven leaders that we've ever had. I'd like you to reminisce a little bit about what those conversations were like, what it was like being with President Reagan, Governor Reagan with

his vision throughout so many things, the Berkeley uprisings, and then all the challenges to America and to world peace. If we could capture some of your thoughts, that would be wonderful.

Edwin Meese:

Sure. Well, Ronald Reagan really was an excellent leader and he was a man who was very well read. People don't realize the fact that he had been reading in history, reading about government, reading about politics generally and politics in a broader sense from literally boyhood, because he moved around from place to place because his father moved from town-to-town to find work during the Depression during his youth. As a result, he had a hard time making friends because he was with a new group all the time. But he did... As his father had told him, "As long as he had a book, he would never be lonely." He was an avid reader and was really knowledgeable in a lot of the things that made higher education important. He, of course, had gone to college, in a small college, and also had been on the Board of Regents of the University of California as Governor of the State.

He had a great deal of interest in higher education himself. As a result, he also believed in the importance, thinking back on this idea of shared governance, that there was a proper role for the Board of Regents and there's also a limit to what outside forces should guide what the curriculum was. I remember when he was governor, he vetoed a bill that the legislature had passed requiring the University of California and the other state colleges to provide, I believe it was a course in geography, something along that line. He vetoed the bill, not that he disagreed with the idea, but rather that he felt the legislature should not be telling the faculty what the curriculum was, their role was to provide the funds and make sure they were well spent, but it was not to interfere on the province of the academic decisions of the university.

Michael Poliakoff:

Now, that's a remarkable moment. I wonder, or perhaps I should say, I hope that we can maintain that. It puts a real burden on the Boards of Trustees to do their jobs. I've noticed that some legislatures have now begun to take up that slack and actually say that public institutions will have a requirement for the study of American history, for example. But, your point is really one that brings us back to the fact that board governance ought to be real governance, and so often it doesn't seem to be able to do that. I'd like to bring us back to another point, which is where we go from here in higher education. We're at a rather troublesome juncture when we're seeing real decline in the curriculum, a real disregard for the free exchange of ideas, runaway expenditure. I wonder if we could pull on some of your experience about how to turn that around.

Edwin Meese:

Well, I think there are a number of ways. One of them does have a role for the legislature, and that is how the money is spent, particularly in the state university. The legislature provides a fairly substantial amount of the funding of higher education, some of it comes from other sources like tuition and donations, contributions, that sort of thing. Every state in their state budgets has a considerable amount of money going to higher education, and it's very important that be properly spent and that the financial foundation is there for the faculty to use and to use wisely also. There is a role there for the legislature, and that's one of the things that I think we need right now. A good portion of the money going into higher education does not go for education, it goes for very heavy staffing. For example, looking at some university budgets, you find that new money coming to the university often is going to increase the number of people who don't teach that are on the staff rather than those that are, and I think that's a big mistake.

The idea that we have all kinds of officials on the staff, the administrative side of the university, we've got this idea of... They call them something like diversity officers, that sort of thing. When I was on the faculty and when I was on the Board of Visitors, there was looking at budgets of the number of people that are in the field of diversity, which is of an important consideration to have one of many advisors to the president and the faculty, but you would probably have maybe one as a person on the staff who had this responsibility, or maybe someone had a shared responsibility, usually like an assistant dean who had that one of many parts of his portfolio or her portfolio, and that was very appropriate. Today, they have... I don't exaggerate, they have dozens of people who have those kinds of titles. You now have almost more people on dean's staff than you have who are running the whole university, and so I think that just is a symbol of how we've gotten off on the wrong track in so many colleges.

Michael Poliakoff:

I actually had the experience... I read a job advertisement from Berkeley for a new Vice Chancellor of Equity and Inclusion, and the job announcement mentioned that the budget for this office was \$25 million. In order to be able to use that publicly, I thought I'd better verify it yet again, so I wrote to Berkeley's Vice President for Public Affairs and said, "Is this in fact an accurate figure?" He emailed back, I've kept it as evidence, "No, the budget is \$34 million," and none of that goes to scholarships. I thought to myself, "If I were provost and someone said to me, you have \$34 million to give to deserving students who otherwise could not afford to come to Berkeley, I would create quite a lot of diversity." This is all going into a bureaucracy, as you said, to deans and other administrators. It is quite frankly, quite shocking. It seems to be the triumph of ideology over student wellbeing.

Edwin Meese:

That's right. But it also is, I think, symbolic of the fact that there are so many other kinds of positions also on the staffs of universities, so that the numbers of vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, and the number of assistant deans. I lectured at universities for several years when I left the government, and I probably would be at least a dozen campuses each year. One of the things that I always noted when I arrived there, I would always be greeted by somebody as a representative of the institution that would meet me at the airplane and so on, and how many assistant deans, at least one of their roles being a chauffeur for visiting guests as opposed to having students who could well use the money for that kind of thing, instead we have an assistant dean. That seemed to me that we seem to have more deans than faculty members that I met while I was there.

Michael Poliakoff:

Armand created the most remarkable tool called How Colleges Spend Money and just produced a report. Armand, you should talk a little bit about this, the cost of excess.

Armand Alacbay:

We looked at data from nine years following the Great Recession, 1500 colleges and universities, and did a regression analysis to see what are the trends in spending and is that actually doing anything? We found that since the Great Recession, something we should have known from the beginning, schools continued to spend more even as philanthropic support waned, even as controlling for levels of state funding spending continued to go up, driving tuition up. Not only that, most of it or at least an increasing share of it was going towards these administrative offices, student services offices and the like, and also without any relation or a correlation with graduation. I guess a question there is, when you were on the

Board of Visitors, what tests did you use? How did you know that money was being spent appropriately? What are the kind of metrics used? What are the internal ways you judged that?

Edwin Meese:

Well, there were two aspects of it. I think one was the fact that we paid attention to the budget and that we had various committees of the Board of Visitors and some working on the instructional costs, others on the costs of the physical plan, and others on similar types of expenditures. We looked at those as a part of our work each year, but that was part of it. The other part of it was we had a high quality administration in the university and they were not interested either in building a bureaucracy or in having more people than they actually needed to do the work. To give you an idea of how that has changed over the years, when I was in law school, we had an excellent dean who was one of the greatest scholars in the study of torts, and he actually spent a good portion of his time besides basic governance tasks that any dean would have to, but he spent I would say at least half his time in the library doing scholarship himself, which was a good example to the rest of the faculty.

Then in addition to him, there was an assistant dean who had the responsibilities of being dean of students, dean of admissions, dean of alumni affairs, and also dean of things like publicity and that sort of thing. In other words, there was one assistant dean and two or three secretaries in the administrative office, and that was the entire staff of the law school. Some faculty members picked up some of that load in addition to the other responsibilities. Today, I'm sure the number of staff members has increased vastly in most law schools and it is quite a different situation.

Michael Poliakoff:

We had begun to talk about what the responsibility of the board is to prepare young people who will be ready for engaged and informed citizenship. I'm very troubled when I read something like the Quinnipiac poll that was taken right after Russia invaded Ukraine, and only 45% of the younger respondents, that's 18 to age 24, said that they would stand and fight if Russia invaded the United States rather than flee to another country. I thought to myself, "How badly have we failed? How much has changed from the attitude of the country before us?" Whether on the D side or the R side, we've come to a very strange new place. The question that I particularly wanted to get your thoughts on, since we're really looking at these questions of values, what's the role of the university, the role of the board in turning this around?

Edwin Meese:

Well, I think the role of the board is not indoctrination as such, but it is to talk about the responsibilities of citizenship, the responsibilities... And to accompany that with an accurate portrayal of history and of what has happened in terms of people, protecting the country as a part of the responsibilities of citizenship. There's an organization known as the Freedom Foundation at Valley Forge, which teaches teachers on things like the history of the founding, constitution making, and that sort of thing. One of the things that they did, which I thought was a very good idea, many places talk about a bill of rights, which are the prerogatives and privileges of citizenship, but very few places did what they did there. That was they also promulgated a bill of responsibilities to show that there is a concomitant responsibility of citizenship as well as enjoying the rights thereof.

I think that those are the kinds of things that they need to go into the overall thinking, starting in a very general way of the governing board, then progressing to the faculty, and through that to the students so that these things having to do with what a citizen has a responsibility of doing, including defending the country, are understood as they were at the time, fortunately, when I went to college as just a normal part of a person's acceptance of what those responsibilities are. I happened to be in military service

during the time of the Korean War, and so all of us virtually who were physically able either by personal decision or by, at that time, by the draft served in the military services. One of the things I noticed about that was when we all came back afterwards, when I went into law school afterwards, there was a real sense not only of the fact that people had done their duty, but also the fact that as a result of that they were much more organized, more knowledgeable, more industrious students in the law school.

As a matter of fact, most of us really wanted to get through law school as quickly as possible so we could get into an earning profession. That was an important part growing up, was having not just the burden of being in the military, but actually the privilege and the benefits of having been in the military.

Michael Poliakoff:

When you were busy with some of these really wonderful changes in the notion of general education, of Core curriculum at George Mason University, you were also an advocate for something that was quite forward thinking, which was that policemen should all have a four-year college education. Nowadays, we hear more talk about the need for policemen to understand guardianship as well as law enforcement, but I dare say when you were bringing these things up, they were really considered quite novel. I would be grateful for your thoughts on how you developed that pattern of thinking and how you were able to articulate it.

Edwin Meese:

I think to start with, it should be noted that today there's many more members of police departments, men and women, who even right down to the officer on the street that many of them have at least a couple of years of education, many departments require that, some require four years. The reason is I think over the years that police executives have found something that people... It really has to do with higher education generally, that a person who graduates from college is not just a person who has a knowledge of certain things, but college should produce people who have an ability to think, an ability to reason, people who have a broad approach to life generally. Those qualities are extremely necessary in a police officer.

It is a combination of having a broader experience than simply going through high school and immediately into a police department when they attain a couple of years of usually work experience, and that's important. But the officer who has a broader thought pattern, broader education as you get out of college. The other aspect of that is that you also have a better balance for decision-making. You have then a view of life and a better understanding of life generally to use when you're making decisions on the street. It is a proven fact that officers with a college education have less mistakes and less misconduct generally than police officers who have not had that opportunity.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, that's a beautiful vindication of something that you have always stood for, which is the importance of the liberal arts. I remember from your time on the ACTA board that you were always a very strong advocate of ACTA's support for a strong general education for Core curriculum that would include that. One does always want to think that people who are going to have a baton, a gun, and a badge will be deep thinkers, people who will recognize the subtleties and the nuance of life, and the country can be very grateful for many things. Grateful to you, Ed, for thinking through such issues and all of the things that you did in steering the country and in steering George Mason as an exemplary board. We're just so very grateful for the opportunity to have this conversation and want to thank you from all of us, our ACTA audience, our Higher Ed audience, and the whole ACTA family.

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Edwin Meese:

Well, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this with you because, as I said before, I so admire the work that ACTA is doing. It's one of those mediating institutions that stands for and takes the responsibility to promulgate both the standards and the qualities of higher education, which are important to continuing the traditions and the culture of our nation, which is so important today when there are unfortunately a number of forces that I mentioned earlier, which are trying to move us in the opposite direction.

Doug Spry:

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