

The College of Wooster  
Convocation  
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Grant H. Cornwell

Global Citizenship in an Election Year

**Introduction**

Welcome. Welcome Trustees, alumni, members of the community, and guests. Welcome faculty and staff of the College. Welcome students. Today we begin, officially and in earnest, a new year of liberal inquiry. It is an honor, a privilege, and a joy to launch our noble work together.

Let me extend a special welcome to those students, faculty, and administrative staff members for whom this is their **first** new beginning at The College of Wooster. Know that you are joining a community of learners that has been committed to the

enterprise of liberal education for 139 years. In my own case, this is the beginning of my sophomore year; this means that I have been around just long enough to have opinions, but that I still have a lot to learn.

What I want to do in my remarks today is talk about our mission, our common purpose as a liberal arts college. I think it is important to remain mindful that our work here together is a **social investment into the future, not** just of our students, but of **global civil society**. This is why we are gathered here. It is why The College of Wooster was founded in 1866 and why it exists today. Though we have a variety of roles in this undertaking, we are each here to engage in this noble work.

Students quite often refer to “the Wooster Bubble,” the phenomenon of feeling isolated in our small campus community, which can seem self-sufficient and disconnected from the larger world. In

one sense, this is both true and intentional; liberal arts colleges were founded in small, rural towns, often in bucolic settings, with the idea that these four years were a time to be removed from the distractions of modern society for the purpose of being immersed in liberal learning.

In another sense, though, this gets it **all wrong**. As our mission statement says, we exist to educate “students with the capacity and motivation to become educated leaders in a complex society.” The world beyond our campus is complex indeed, and an essential element of our mission is to help you make sense of it, **not** just for the purpose of abstract understanding, but for the purpose of engaging that world - to help guide its direction, shape its future, and solve its problems.

### **Liberal Education for Global Citizenship**

The title of my reflections this morning is “Global Citizenship in an Election Year.”

Don't worry, I am certainly not going to spend my time trying to tell you how to vote. There is enough of that around. And it is a good thing, really; it is how democracy works, and I encourage you to listen to the arguments of others and to offer your own in return. That, too, is how democracy works.

My project this morning, however, is something larger in scope. I would like to offer some thoughts on the immediate and urgent business of liberal learning, on the larger global context within which this American presidential election is taking place, and to offer some things to think about as you reason about how to vote.

Let me begin with the very concept of liberal education. There is not a person here who does not want, or value, a good job, a meaningful and prosperous livelihood. The good news is that an outstanding liberal education, while it is a

substantial investment by any measure, is the best preparation for working one's way to the most meaningful and prosperous livelihoods in today's global economy.

But our work here is not about job training, but rather about something much more fundamental and profound. This is something of an irony of liberal education; it is the most effective launch pad for access to leadership and a rewarding career and yet that is not the first purpose of our mission.

As you may know, I often find myself drawing on the work of the contemporary philosopher and legal scholar, Martha Nussbaum. The project of liberal education is, as she says, nothing less than the **cultivation of humanity**. In a book by that title and elsewhere, Nussbaum advocates an education designed to produce "citizens of the world," people of **cosmopolitan subjectivity**, who see a world full of **equally**

**valuable human persons**, all of whom have a claim on our sense of moral obligation. Nussbaum believes that the task of liberal education is to enable us to imagine the realities of peoples distant in time and space, to understand both what humanity has in common but also the variety of ways in which it manifests itself. Through the reading of history, literature, and poetry, through the study of the social and natural sciences, liberally educated persons develop **empathy without borders**.

This is one way to describe our mission. I want to spend some time probing what it means to do be engaged in this work in our particular moment in history.

## **Global Shifts: The End of the American Imperium**

Fareed Zakaria writes in his most recent book, *The Post-American World*, that (I quote):

There have been three tectonic power shifts over the last five hundred years, fundamental changes in the distribution of power that have reshaped international life – its politics, economics, and culture. The first was the rise of the Western world, a process that began in the fifteenth century and accelerated dramatically in the late eighteenth century. It produced modernity as we know it: science and technology, commerce and capitalism, the agricultural and industrial revolutions. It also produced the prolonged political dominance of the

nations of the West. (Zakaria, 1-2) (end quote)

This rise was financed by the juggernaut of European colonialism, which, fueled by avarice and arrogance, rolled over the globe claiming land and souls. Plantation slavery and the wealth produced within the colonialist economy played a huge role in the rise of Western global hegemony. It is important to be mindful of this as we seek to comprehend our moment; **we are each, individually or collectively, the inheritors of relative privilege, power, and opportunity not because we deserve it, or because we have earned it through some superior effort or brilliance, but because we are accidentally located in a history that has favored some with fortune built on the misfortune of others.**

I point this out as fact, not to inspire guilt, but to add historicity to what is all too

often an ahistorical analysis of who has what and why.

Zakaria continues:

The second shift, which took place in the closing years of the nineteenth century, was the rise of the United States. Soon after it industrialized, the United States became the most powerful nation since imperial Rome...For most of the last century, the United States has dominated global economics, politics, science, and culture. For the last twenty years, that dominance has been unrivaled, a phenomenon unprecedented in modern history. (Zakaria, 2)

The rest of his argument makes the case that "we are now living through the third great power shift of the modern era" (Zakaria, 2), that the unitary supremacy of the United States has come to an end. His argument is that this shift in the global

order is not the result of American complacency, nor is it a function of a failure in American foreign policy. Rather, as he says, **it is not the fall of the West but the “rise of the rest.”**

All of the students here in the chapel, here at Wooster, present on every campus across this nation and every nation, have known only a world with one superpower. This era was the brief historical moment of the **American Imperium**. I do not use this term as praise or blame but as material fact; for the entirety of your lives the U.S. has been the single, global superpower.

What is important to ponder is that none of us even slightly older than you has had our consciousness formed in the global context of such a regime. Most of your faculty and parents came of age in the era of the Cold War, in a bipolar world of contested ideologies. That world was a setting for a prolonged and dangerous

contest, we were told, between capitalism and liberal democracy on the one hand and socialism and authoritarianism on the other. The political rhetoric we grew up with described the Soviet Union as an evil empire, a looming, dark force that had to be defeated. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the ascendancy of the U.S. as the singular, hegemonic superpower were heralded as the moral triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy; good had prevailed over evil.

Indeed, Alan Greenspan, in his fascinating new book, *The Age of Turbulence*, argues that the “rise of the rest” is due to the proliferation of market economies and liberal democracies. Greenspan goes country by country through Brazil, India, China, Russia, Japan, the nations of Europe, connecting the rise of global capitalism with the spread of liberal democracy, and, he argues, a global

reduction in poverty and rise in longevity and general human welfare.

In other words, though their rhetorical and ideological projects differ, both Zakaria and Greenspan offer an analysis of the last century where the West in general and the U.S. most recently have propagated **a world system of a global market economy**, undergirded by the spread of liberal democratic political systems and the rule of law. In their view, the crusade to spread these social systems has succeeded and – **this is the key point** - the success has created the global context within which the U.S. is being displaced.

Let me try to offer an analogy. Imagine a parent who invests years of effort, tons of zeal and enthusiasm, into teaching his children to play basketball, all in the hope that he could play with them. For a moment – for one shining moment - as they mature, the goal is realized. There is

sufficient parity for them all to play together... but the parent is still able to dominate. And then the moment is gone. As the parent gets older, slower, and weaker, the children get rapidly... seemingly uncontrollably... bigger, stronger, faster, more independent. The parent, once dominant, then equal, becomes a secondary role player, soon to be a spectator.

The point is that for your entire lives, and for a long time before, the U.S. has championed global free trade. It has supported, even created by force, market economies wherever it could secure influence. **The irony with which we are struggling as a nation is that America has nurtured, fostered, and defended a world system that is displacing or overwhelming American privilege and influence.**

I am suggesting that you are coming of age at the end of the American Imperium.

You will hear in political rhetoric all kinds of nostalgia, talk of failure and loss, and boosterism about recapturing competitiveness. I am suggesting that narratives of U.S. supremacy are nostalgic and dangerous. They orient us to a world order that has passed, and any quest to recapture it is both doomed and ethically wrongheaded.

You are, indeed, inheriting a world you will be positioned to lead, and there are many problems that, through your intelligence, education, and will, you will be able to help solve. You will have all of the tools to find your way, prosper, and do good. But you will not move through your world with uncontested privilege or be celebrated as a herald from the global hegemon.

My own view is that this shift is not a bad thing. With the “rise of the rest” and the global displacement of the U.S., we are

rapidly moving towards a world political and economic topography where power, privilege, and influence are more globally distributed.

I hasten to point out that this is **not** the same as saying that globalization is producing greater socioeconomic equality. Greenspan and Zakaria offer evidence that the proportion of people living in abject poverty is decreasing in much of what used to be called the developing world, and that measures of human welfare like longevity and infant mortality are improving. Maybe. But at the same time global capitalism is producing a globally distributed economic elite, and a resulting concentration of wealth that even Greenspan worries may threaten the rule of law and the prospects for market stability.

These are some of the problems you will have to grapple with. I want to encourage you in your studies to gain all that is

required to come to a sophisticated understanding of these issues, and to develop **your own, independent minds** about what needs to be done.

There is absolutely no better way to prepare yourself for this world than with a solid liberal education. To understand globalization, to understand your place in this complex world at this moment in history, your moment, you need to devote yourself to the study of language, so that you can communicate with people who see the world differently than you, so that you can **listen** to them and share **your** views.

You need to study history, sociology, political science, and economics so that you can discern and analyze the larger social dynamics that form the context for every issue or problem you need to grapple with.

You need to study math and science because so many problems can only be understood and so many solutions can only

be imagined with a deep grasp of these disciplines.

You need to study the world's religious and philosophical traditions, arts and cultures, because in the end humans are innately motivated to make meaning out of their experience, and meaning is always systemic, narrative, and historically situated. In other words, you have a hell of a lot of work to do in your short time here.

Finally, as you think about the presidential election, ask yourself who is better equipped to lead this nation forward in this "age of turbulence". Who is better equipped to understand the dynamics of the emerging world order and to make wise choices about how the United States and its citizens can prosper even as we are repositioned?

I am profoundly optimistic about the world's future, not the least because of the potential that **you** and your global peers

have to lead it forward, to take all of the incredible tools of mind, technology, and industry that you have to work with and to apply them with more wisdom and insight than those who have come before.

But as I have said, wisdom and insight are **earned**, and that is the work we are here to do. Let's get on with it.

With great respect for our common purpose and profound optimism for our common future, I hereby convene the 139<sup>th</sup> year of liberal inquiry at The College of Wooster.