UNITED STATES
MILITARY ACADEMY
West Point, New York

THE 28TH

SOL FEINSTONE LECTURE

ON

"The Meaning of Freedom"

Dr. Michael Eric Dyson

7 November 2000

The United States Military Academy is pleased to sponsor an annual lecture series on the Meaning of Freedom. It is significant that this lecture program has been made possible by the generosity of the late Mr. Sol Feinstone, a dedicated American Patriot whose commitment to the ideals of the American Revolution led him to devote many years of effort, as well as considerable personal resources, to the collection of important letters, manuscripts, and books dealing with our heritage of freedom. His donation of these items to libraries and educational institutions ensures that the message which they proclaim will be preserved and transmitted to future generations of Americans.

Mr. Feinstone's abiding faith in the brotherhood of free nations of men has found further expression in several lecture series which he has endowed in order to permit prominent Americans to interpret the Meaning of Freedom.

The United States Corps of Cadets and the staff and faculty of the Military Academy are pleased to recognize the generosity and loyalty of this great American for providing a living endowment in the defense of freedom.

The Meaning of Freedom

Michael Eric Dyson

Good Evening! Introducing our speaker tonight will be Colonel Andre Sayles.

Colonel Andre Sayles:
General and Mrs. Christman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, and members of the Class of 2002, it is my extreme pleasure this evening to welcome you to our 28th Annual Lecture on the Meaning of Freedom.

This annual lecture series was endowed in 1970 by Dr. Sol Feinstone, who had a very personal interest in insuring that Americans explore, open and from a variety of perspectives, the meaning we attach to the concept of freedom.

Dr. Feinstone arrived in the United States at the age of 14, a refugee from Lithuania, alone and penniless. As was so many other newly arrived emigrants, he worked very hard to take advantage of the opportunities this new land offered him. He achieved the American Dream by becoming a successful businessman.

During his life, he was also a forester, a teacher and an author. His success enabled him to establish national awards and build libraries, such as the David Library of the American Revolution, located in Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania. The lecture this evening, as well as past lectures, is endowed by Dr. Feinstone as a means to help cadets, the future leaders of our Army and nation, become more aware of our heritage of freedom.

Our speaker tonight is best selling author, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson. Dr. Dyson received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy from Carson-Newman College and a Master of Arts and Ph.D. in religion from Princeton University. Rev. Dyson has written six books including one entitled, I may not get there with you – the true Martin Luther King Jr., just released this year. I'll add that Dr. Dyson is also working on a new book which will be released at some point in the near future.

Dr. Dyson's work is well-known throughout the country and beyond. He has received many awards. In addition to his monographs, Dr. Dyson has written scores of articles for mass publications including the New York Times and US News and World Report, as well as numerous articles for academic journals. Dr. Dyson is frequently sought out as a social commentator in venues such as Night Line, Good Morning America and the Today Show. He has lectured across the country and throughout the world at Universities and in public forums. Dr. Dyson is currently the Ida B.Wells-Barnett University professor and professor of Religious Studies at DePaul University.

Joining Dr. Dyson this evening is his wife, Marcia, who is also a famous author. It is with great pleasure that we offer a warm, West Point welcome to Dr. Michael Eric Dyson.

Dr. Dyson:
Thank you so very kindly Colonel Sayles for that generous and warm introduction and to all of you marvelous cadets for that wonderfully, rapturously, generous response. I only can hope that you will feel the same way after I finish. I want to say to General Dan Christman, to his lovely and brilliant wife, Mrs. Christman, to General Dan Kaufman the Dean, to Dr. Michael LaBare, who has shepherded us through this long process of coming to West Point, and to all of you, I am deeply honored and grateful to be here this evening at West Point, at such a historic institution that has shaped the lives of young men and women and the defense of our country and its values and ideals. We had a most powerful conversation with many cadets tonight with your powerful and

wonderful superintendent, General Christman and his engaging wife, and with Dean Kaufman and Dr. LaBare and Colonel Sayles and many others. And so, we're honored to be here tonight, we are grateful for the hospitality of the Christmans, we're grateful for the invitation to come here tonight, and most especially delighted to have the opportunity to engage young people around an issue of such importance as the concept of freedom, so I want to thank Dr. LaBare for his persistence in getting my wife and I here tonight.

Rev. Marcia Dyson, my wife, is indeed, as Colonel Sayles indicated, a writer of renown. She is also a very powerful intellectual preacher an insightful social critic and an especially good human being and I am glad to count her as my partner as we travel throughout the country trying to shake the rafters and kick up enough sand to be able to justify our existence here on Earth. I want her to stand, Rev. Marcia Dyson.

I want to say, Mrs. Kaufman, I wanted to acknowledge, of course, the lovely and vibrant Mrs. Kaufman as well – that we had the opportunity to sit with at dinner.

Now, if I wasn't on military time, I'd tell a few jokes and josh around a bit but I know that you all are precise. I'm not use to this kind of discipline. I should have come here myself, but I'm honored to be here, to have this opportunity to think out loud about an issue that I think is so central to the definition of American society, to the anatomy of our future and certainly, the shape of our past. So when you think about freedom, and we think about the importance of freedom to the ideals, the values, the visions of American society, we think about how important it is to reflect critically upon the very visions that have generated our practices in the contemporary society. But it is also good to think about how freedom drove those to whom we look as ideals and icons and models from the past. So, I want to think about the meaning of freedom in both its historic trajectory and in its contemporary embodiment and then finally speak a bit about our responsibility to expand the parameters of freedom in our own time.

I've already indicated that freedom is crucial to the definition of American society. Western civilization in general, American society in particular, cherishes, values, the notion of freedom because without this precious commodity, without this precious concept, without this precious ideal, we would scarcely have the ability to sit here tonight in a free democracy, able to participate broadly in citizenship without undue restraint. We would not be able to choose how we would vote, we would be incapable of determining where we would go to school and so, when we think about the precious character of freedom, we think about its individual merits for our own lives but we also think about its collective virtues in our own lives and that means that as a nation, America has benefitted from the extraordinary capacity to engage in exercising and engaging liberty. Liberty, this word that perhaps is a synonym of freedom, the ability to engage without restraint in the exercise of one's gifts and the ability to participate in the larger pollus, the state, without having imposed upon one's restrictions which hamper the exercise of one's own talents. In other words, you're in a society where you're gifted and those gifts and talents allow you to participate in social democracy without political terror and tyranny.

America indeed was founded upon the principle that it should be free when this nation looked to its august, and yet what it considered to be terroristic neighbors and said, "We shall no longer submit ourselves to the prospect of taxation without representation" America was born at that very moment. The ideal of representation without restraint was the predicate for expanding American democracy and founding this nation. So the very foundation of American society is predicated on the notion, is based on the idea, that people ought to be able to choose the people who represent them and that if they are being taxed, if they are being held accountable, they ought to be able to hold their leaders accountable and they ought to have a voice in the larger society in which they live. But from the very beginning we know that there were contradictions and conflicts in the expression and exercise of freedom in American Society.

Orlando Patterson in his magisterial national book award winning text says, and this text is entitled Freedom, that the very notion of freedom in the west, and particularly in America, is inconceivable without a corollary, that is a parallel, engaging in the notion of slavery. Slavery made American freedom possible. The irony there is that without slaves in American society, without slaves in the United States of America, the notion of liberty and freedom could not exist in its resplendent, in its resident manifestation. In other words, America couldn't even be free without having a slave population that was un-free and the notion of that freedom has to be taken into account.

What does that mean? That means from the very beginning, the germ, the ideal of freedom, was already being fraught with, fraided with, put upon, by a notion of un-freedom because there's a tension in freedom. Freedom is not simply an ideal, it is a practice for if it is to be fruitful, if it is to be powerful, if it is to be meaningful, if it is to be compelling, we must never simply entertain abstract notions of freedom, we must talk about the conditions under which freedom exists. And in the society in which we live, the unfortunate consequence of the quest for freedom for some was the denial of freedom to others, and Mr. Patterson, a sociologist at Harvard University, says we can scarcely conceive of what liberty means in American society without contemplating, without interrogating, without examining, without scrutinizing at the same time the simultaneous denial of freedom to a group of human beings who were brought here as chattel slaves.

Now, the point is not to remonstrate against Americans who bought and sold others. The point is to understand that in this society, it is a dangerous thing to entertain freedom for oneself while denying it to others. The arbitrary exercise of freedom for some while others are being denied that freedom is a contradiction to the notion of freedom itself. For if we were to engage in freedom, it means that we must be free, all of us together, or we will none of us be free at all. It means that if we understand what freedom means, that it is so precious, it is so real and so fundamental a truth, a practice and an ideal, that we ought to be

willing not simply to die for it for ourselves but for our countrymen and women as well.

Now those of you who are listening to me tonight understand that. Many of your predecessors gave their lives after all in the defense of this country's values and in defense of this country's freedom, and it's freedom to exist as a state unto itself and the ability for this nation to be able to help others in the world to exercise their own right to be free from the tyranny of dictatorship. But at the same time, when we think about American society, when we think about Western civilization, we begin to think that the meaning of freedom is much more complex, much more contradictory, much more messy than we'd like to believe. If we think of freedom in black and white we miss out about how many gray areas there are to freedom. Emanuel Kant, the great philosopher, said are we talking about freedom for or freedom to, freedom from or freedom to engage in a practice. Freedom to, he said, is one thing, freedom from tyranny is another. To be free from a situation means that we are rested ourselves, we have extricated ourselves from contradictory cultural experiences. In other words, we seize our freedom in the face of hostile oppositions of who we are. We get free from slavery. We get free from addiction. We get free from some circumstance that tries to hem us in. We get free from a tyrannical oppressor. That is freedom from, freedom in the negative.

But, there is a different notion to freedom in the positive. Freedom to, the ability to, the liberty to exercise ones gifts and talents, exercise ones understanding of the state, exercise ones capacity to be a full fledged human being. That kind of positive freedom is not simply freedom from restriction; it is the freedom to engage in exploring all the talents, capacities and abilities we have as human beings.

I would submit that is a much more difficult thing to do because when we are trying to get free from some object of tyranny, we understand who our oppressor and are opponent is, and therefore we are able to reduce things to black and white. I am trying to get free from this

particularly oppressive situation. But freedom to is a different story. The positive notion of freedom is that we must exercise our freedom for some good cause, from some edifying position, for some overwhelmingly good ideal. And that means then that we engage other free human beings in trying to talk about what it means not only to be free but to exercise freedom and to permit that freedom for other people even and especially those who are most opposed to our ideals. For freedom is of no use if it is not guaranteed to those who oppose my viewpoint, even as it is guaranteed to me as I oppose their viewpoint.

So the problem with freedom is there is the notion of equality at the same time. Many philosophers have argued that the problem with freedom in American society and indeed in the west and indeed in general, is that freedom is always in conversation with other values. To value freedom above all without talking about the relationship of freedom to equality, freedom to justice, freedom to love and charity, freedom to civic responsibility, is to talk about freedom in a vacuum. To speak about freedom in a vacuum is to miss how we must live in our own lives, in our own skins, in our own bodies, in our own circumstances, in our own families, in our own institutions of higher education, while trying to figure out how to live with others. To be free enough to do what we choose to do and at the same time to respect the integrity of another choice that may be diametrically opposed to mine.

So what I mean here is that the meaning of freedom must always be fleshed out in a concrete context. One thing to have the ideal, another thing to have the practice. So when I think about the meaning of freedom for us who are Americans, those of us who live in the United States of America, those of us who treasure it, those of us who die for it, we must begin to understand first of all, that there are many ways in which those of us who cherish freedom deny it to other people, both collectively and individually. Now, why is that important? That's important my brothers and sisters because those of us who cherish freedom must make sure that we do not participate in any practice that would attempt to limit, deny, circumscribe, or erase the possibility of

other people being free and inevitably and often, it is the case that we do just that.

Our freedom to be able to speak is often bounded by the ability of another person to speak as well and the things we say, do they hurt them? Do they undermine their integrity? Do we challenge them? Do we attack them? Do we assault them? Do we understand that our speech has consequence? That words we utter can have even physical consequence that it can make a difference in a person's life calling them a name. The freedom to be able to engage in calling somebody a name, a vicious epitaph about a woman, a vicious epithet about a racial minority or a sexual minority, that to utter that phrase, to utter that word itself carries consequence, carries weight, has a concrete manifestation in the life of somebody else, and furthermore, people are not equally free. That means that one kind of discourse, one kind of rhetoric, one kind of speech coming from one person may not have the same consequence as coming from another person.

What does that mean in concrete? That means that when we life in an American society where one group has had access to resources, has had access to tremendous material and financial support, that group of people have a different responsibility in response to freedom than those who have been historically denied. So that when we speak about American society and we talk about freedom in the abstract, we better talk about it in the concrete in order to tease out the manifestations of freedom so the ability to say things to talk about certain issues it itself a tremendous liberty that many people have not had. Are you aware of course, as I'm sure you are, that in the society in which we live, it was not until rather recently that women were able to participate fully in the expression of their political franchise in American society.

Elizabeth Katie Stanton, another feminist, so Sojourner Truth among them, argued vociferously and powerfully for the inclusion of women in the larger circle of American privilege. Women were like children, to be seen but not heard from, second class citizens, disenfranchised

politically because they could not get the vote and yet when they began to vote and make a difference in American society, they had begun to exercise their freedom to choose representatives for them. They lived in a country that said it did not want to have a notion of freedom that lay it ultimately to tyranny and yet women as a class, as a group, as a sex, as a gender, if you will, were denied the equal opportunity to be able to exercise their gifts, their talents and their ability to vote.

African American people in this country historically were denied opportunity to engage in voting until Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy and Fannie Lou Hamer and a host of other brave, proud Americans. Yes they were African Americans but they were Americans, often seen to be second class citizens, and when they chose to oppose American practices that were vicious and segregated, they were sometimes called un-American by those who chose themselves to be the representatives of a true American democracy. These people who felt that they had committed themselves to the American way of life, they might have been a part of the military, they might have been part of their local church or their religious establishment, and they felt that the mingling of black and white in America meant the subversion of true democracy for American society and so they gave unto the bitter end their lives to the principle that we must remain separate. And yet those true patriots who are willing to be critical of America's practices and true patriots in the defense of freedom are always willing to put forth critique, never believe that you must be in locked step.

Never believe that you must somehow give up your autonomy, your individual ethos, your particular stamp on reality because you are part of a collective, whether it is the military or the church or the synagogue or the temple, whether it is part of a collective like an institution of higher education, you never surrender the integrity of your individuality. And so those heroic Americans fought against white supremacy, fought against economic inequality, fought against the inability to vote and it was not until 1965 in the south when the Voting Rights Act passed that this great group of Americans was granted the privilege for which they

had died, going to war, giving their blood, mixing their blood with the soil when they were allowed to do so, means then that freedom was an ideal but it was not a practice.

Do you know that during the second World War we interred Japanese brothers and sisters as you well know in what essentially were concentration camps, because we were suspicious of them because of their racial and then certainly ethnic identification, a knee jerk reactionary response to them. And so we did heinous things to them even as we were fighting, Hitlerian fascism. In European theaters we were reproducing the very pathology in our own nation. Why do I talk about this? Because it is necessary to acknowledge that this is a great nation but a great nation that is flawed because there has been tension between the notion of freedom on the one hand, freedom to speak its own mind, freedom to be able to exist freely without restraint and on the other hand, other virtues that are equally consequential and important; like justice, like equality, like love in the public space. That means that the tension between freedom and equality must ever be teased out, must ever be talked about, must ever be talked about, must ever be explored. You know this part of the American military. You know this is people who have given your lives in defense of American projects. We know that even in the history of this nation that the military itself has not been exempt from criticism or the exercise of military options has not been exempt from criticism in American society, and understandably some of you might be a bit defense about that because you are in, after all, the business of protecting the interest of American society. Those on the left, like myself, historically who have been very critical of the military in American society, certainly have been made aware that the possibility for the freedom to articulate our criticism, was based at least in part on the ability of America to be defended and for the freedom we exercise to be held precious as a result of your commitments. So the tension between criticism on the one hand, which is seen by some to be treason, and I want to argue against that notion today, and I want to argue tonight that the ability to criticize is part in parcel of the precious freedom of American society and indeed the responsibility of free citizens.

Milosevic has just been virtually voted out, right? In terms of the Serbian sub-Serbian situation and the enormous patricide and the enormous ethnic cleansing that was going on in Serbian Croatian societies, and yet he has even acknowledged that he did not get a majority of the vote and there has to be a run-off, according to his own design. But the real victory there is that democracy is potentially working and the vote is making a difference in that particular theater in that situation. And that means that if democracy is being born there, if a real sense of representative democracy is the basis for that society, we must even more appreciate what we in America have, the opportunity to engage in the exercise of our freedom but the necessity, indeed the responsibility to be self-critical.

Now when I use the word critical I don't mean beating up on folk in unprincipled fashion. I don't mean as the young people say "player hatin' on somebody else", mad 'cause they shoes shine better than yours, their epaulets a bit loftier, they got more stars then you or just "hatin'" in general. I don't mean that. I mean by criticism the capacity to be able to be humble enough to admit you don't know everything. Right? I mean the great African American mystic and prophet Howard Thurman said you can go to the Atlantic Ocean, you can have a glass in your hand, you can dip your glass in the Atlantic Ocean. It may be full of the Atlantic Ocean, but it's not all of the Atlantic Ocean. None of us can exhaust truth even if we're full of it. None of us can exhaust the meanings of freedom even if we're brimming over with the notions of freedom. So, self criticism and criticism of our country is the very crucial life blood that flows throughout the body politic that makes sure that this great thing called America is alive but we must be willing to admit that America is not perfect and the investment in the notion of American perfection is the very antithesis to the notion of freedom.

It was the great poet T.S. Elliot who said "Between the ideal and the reality falls the shadow" and most of us are operating along the shadows. The ideal is one thing, the reality is another thing but we're caught in the

shadows and so, the ability to be able to be self-critical and critical of our government, critical in the edifying sense, critical in the sense that says "I see something wrong with my country and I love my nation" and I want to be able to say to it, "I love you enough to be critical of you."

If you love your children, you don't just let them do whatever they want willy nilly. You've got to put some limits on them. "No, you can't drive the car at 12 years old. You can't even fit in the Range Rover, go back to bed!" The reality is that we must place limits on our children. Now, I'm not talking about paternalistic metaphors here to suggest that we should be somehow restricted and subordinated to this great power. What I am suggesting is that none of us who are really serious about being custodians of democracy can really afford the notion that we must invest in the perfection of American society. This is not a perfect society. This is a society that on the one hand celebrates and cherishes freedom and on the other hand denies it.
But even further, what's important to me when I think about the meaning of freedom, freedom from tyranny but freedom to engage in citizenship and democracy is the notion furthermore that those of us who are free must continue to expand the parameters of American democracy. That means that yes, we must think about issues of racism and sexism and homophobia and I know that the American military is now thinking and searching its soul to its own critic because there are a whole lot of institutions ain't even worried about "don't ask – don't tell", "don't even mention it" and "shut the heck up."

So, the least the reality is that there is some dialogue potentially going on. Yes, coerced but most of us do right after we have been forced to do so. That's the reality of the American society. But what the interesting point is, is that in regard to sexual orientation, what we must honestly confront is the fact that if we believe that all human beings are children of God, and if we believe that every human being has the right and the freedom to be able to exist in his or her skin in the way that they were made, we must respect the mystery of sexual identity and orientation and the mystery of human identity.

But that means that none of us, and ain't none of us that smart, that we know about sexual orientation. Well, why don't you keep that under wraps? Why don't you change it? A gay or lesbian person can no more get up in the morning and be heterosexual then you as a heterosexual can get up and be gay or lesbian.

Now the question is not simply of course I realize this, about identity, it's about behavior. It's about what you do. It's not about who you are; it's about how you behave. But what's interesting in regard to this notion, vis-a -vis, gay and lesbian brothers and sisters is that often their identities are identified through how they behave, otherwise we would not know them. So this kind of distinction may not ultimately work.

My point is not to thrust upon you or to impose on you a narrow conception of sexual identity or orientation or to force onto you my own beliefs about sexual orientation in the military. My point is that the freedom to be who we are always exists in the context where there are limits but those limits must be examined and if we impose those limits arbitrarily, we ourselves are being unjust. So freedom on the one hand is being made vulnerable by our inability to be equal on the other hand or just even more specifically. So when we expand the parameters of American democracy, that means that we want everybody to be free, not just some folk, not just the folks that look like me, not just the folk that smell like me, not just the folk who think like me, not just the folk who are on my same team politically or ideologically. That's why I tell my son, he's at Morehouse College, don't just go to school to talk to people who look like you, who smell like you, whose last name ends like you, whose skin shade is your same, because if you do that you're wasting your time and my money.

So the reality is that we must engage with people who are different than we are, who don't look like us, who don't think like us. You ought to be talking to people if you are right-wing republican, you ought to be speaking to left-wing zealots. There's no harm in that. Or if you are a

liberal, you ought to be speaking to somebody who's moderate or conservative. We ought to talk to people. If you are straight you ought to speak to people who are gay or lesbian. Are you afraid? Are we afraid? Are we incapable of talking to people who think differently than we do. Are we incapable really of exploring the meaning of freedom because we don't want to expand the parameters of democracy because we don't want to expand democracy to those or freedom to those who are different than we are and often the barrier to knowing that other person is our fear, our inability to overcome our own bias. Our inability to overcome our own prejudice and preference and to say "I'm gonna talk to this person above the stereotype, above the vicious bias, above the bigotry that prevails, above what my Mama or Daddy told me was the case, and to begin to think for myself."

So as we expand the parameters of democracy and expand the notion of freedom, your charge here as young cadets, yes even at West Point, is to learn to think critically. Now I don't mean if you may have been believing that no, no the point is to support the project that we are about here and of course that's the case. An honorable one to be sure, an edifying one to be sure, but one that can also withstand, like any other institution, some critical insight from within. Not just blind, biased commitment but informed commitment, informed participation, loving something not because you're ignorant about it but to have full knowledge of what its weaknesses and flaws and its strengths and virtues are.

Why is that important? That is important my fellow brothers and sisters and Americans because in the society in which we live, when we think about difference, when we think about diversity, when we think about people whose sexual orientation is different or whose race is different or whose ethnicity is different, or whose gender is different, we often fail to imagine what it is to exist in their skin. What might it be like to be a person in their circumstance or situation? Often we seek to deny democracy to those about whom we have little information, about whom

we are fearful, about whom we have no basis for engaging in dialogue or conversation with them.

Finally, it seems to me, that when I think about the notion of American freedom I think about the notion, and not simply American freedom, but western freedom and freedom in general. I think about the virtue, the tremendous opportunity we have as a powerful and strong nation to be able to embrace human beings, to embrace communities, to embrace viewpoints, that are not simply not unlike ours but to be able from the point of strength to acknowledge that diversity makes us stronger.

Now I know that a lot of people say well this word diversity is just a politically correct way of saying we're going to protect certain minorities or we're gonna just deal with issues that people don't want to rule out of bounds and that we should talk about affirmative action, gay and lesbian sexual orientation or dealing with feminists or women's' rights or dealing with economic inequality for poor whites and brown Latino people. No. It seems to me that diversity makes us better. It makes us better as a nation and the freedom to exercise all of our talents is what the American ideal is about.

This is why the great Colin Powell was able to rise to become this storied General that he is, because he was given an opportunity. Because the American Army, he claims in his book that I reviewed for the Los Angeles Times, that the American Army was the head of the curb of so many other institutions in American society and whether we quibble about that or argue about that, the fact is that Colin Powell himself is the product of a system that allowed him to rise through the ranks which is why he defends affirmative action; because he knows that in a nation that is systematically denied freedom to certain people, it must now unlock the doors of opportunity so that everybody is free to engage in, not simply to be free from but free to, to do the best they can to develop their talents the best way they know how.

So for me, diversity is a call and a cry. Not simply racial diversity or sexual diversity or gender diversity but in terms of body styles, in terms of body types, there are so many prejudices that glut, that clot the arteries of American appreciation and reciprocal affection. There are so many things that give us really a "heart attack" of failed compassion for those who don't look like us or those who don't think like us and I argue for this diversity ideologically, intellectually, politically, socially and so on because it is the very heartbeat of American society. This nation will never be as great as it can be until it includes everybody and until all of us enjoy the freedoms that some of us enjoy.

No we know we live in a nation where some people, because of their cash, because of their money, get more opportunity than others. I testified before Senator John McCain two weeks ago and we engaged in a very thrilling dialogue about how money was corrupting the political process. He a republican, me a democrat and a leftist. He a person who was conservative, and yet we agree to the notion that we must expand democracy by getting money out of the political process in ways that corrupt it. So my point ultimately my brothers and sisters as I end here tonight, is the fact that freedom is so precious because we allow everybody to participate in the large pageantry of American and western democracy. That means that we know that some people get left out and because they get left out. They may have anger. They may have resentment. They may have a largely legitimate rebellion against the so-called mainstream American society, which is what some forms of so-called Nirvana music was about.

People got all upset when Kirk Cobain came out smells like Teen Spirit. Nice jam in my own book. And so the reality is that you know Andy Rooney on 60 Minutes said "Oh my God! This self-serving young man who was so narcissistic he committed suicide." No! Maybe he was alienated from the very mainstream institutions that support you Mr. Rooney, but did not give support to this young man who was alienated from his own community and life and maybe made self-destructive choices. Maybe when we listened to Tupak Shakur, a young man who

was certainly filled with rage at the injustices he confronted should be listened to. Tupak said just the other day, "I got lynched by some crooked cops and to this day those same cops on the beat, getting major pay but when I get my check, they takin' tax out so we payin' the cops to knock the blacks out."

So before you engage in a reactionary response to the assault on police, understand how police brutality has shaped young people and made them suspicious and hostile to police forces that in mainstream communities, are seen as good and positive. My point is my brothers and sisters, we must all imagine what it is to be each other in order to protect the freedom of each to be able to develop as fully and broadly and profoundly as each can. And as I end here then, Robert Frost said "Freedom is moving easy in a harness." Nobody is ever just free to do whatever you want. Get up in the morning and do whatever you want. I know ya'll know you can't just get up in the morning and do what you want. There is something about the austere dignity of certain kinds of regiment and rules. But those rules must serve our common human purposes, we must not serve them.

And in the final analysis, freedom is about understanding the restrictions under which we live, the circumstances under which we exist and the conditions under which we aspire to make meaning out of our lives. And given that notion of "freedom is moving easy in a harness", doesn't mean that I'm just free to do whatever I like. It means that I'm free to create and participate in democracy, freedom, justice and equality, and the American pageantry of true citizenship by being able to embrace brothers and sisters across every line possible and to embrace them as full participants. Yes disagree, yes perhaps being opposed, but finally committed to the same goal, that we together shall remake this nation and make American democracy something real, something fruitful and something powerful. Then freedom will be a positive watchword for the ability of all Americans to participate in the great drama that you continue to defend, that we continue to be justly critical of, and that together we can shape for the betterment of our future generations.

Thank you very kindly.

Dr. Dyson has agreed to answer some of your questions. He's especially looking forward to some hard questions. Please wait for the paddle to get to you.

Applause

Questions and Answers

Paddle #3: Sir, I must confess Cadet Cage, Company G-2, still spinning from that speech. Something that confused me in your speech, you seem to take two different approaches at the same time that seem contradictory to me. I consider myself to be a libertarian or a classical liberal and agree almost wholeheartedly with your social ideas that society shouldn't force its morals upon other people. But at the same time Sir, you seem to represent maybe a Raulsian approach where you say more of the modern liberal attitude that society, just being a member or a citizen of a society that you have a moral right to say if you were richer or more prosperous to than maybe through graduated taxes or something like that, take care of the people who didn't have the same opportunities. In my opinion those ideals are opposed to each other and one may be an ideal and one may be practical as you said earlier Sir but how do you reconcile those two like the liberal and the Raulsian view?

Dr. Dyson:
No, brilliantly stated and excellently diagnosed, and I think that on the one hand you know the same way perhaps you as a libertarian defending the ability of individual rights to exist in a particularly lucid political context are also part of a collective, like West Point, like the Army, so that you are absolutely right to a point on one hand, the Raulsian's notion, of course a Raulsian notion, a thick description of justice and Raulsian Philosophy for those who are deep into John Rauls, by now acclaimed to be the greatest political philosopher of the 20th Century it's

safe to say. Rauls said that well justice as fairness so that even if one wants to exercise libertarian prerogatives as an individual, that is protect liberty, individuality and the flourishing of those in the context of political freedom, that one can't even enjoy that libertarian construct without existing in a society that permits it to exist. See, Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking out against America, was made powerful and possible to a certain degree as was Ghandi in his own circumstance and condition in India, because of the relative humanity of the people he opposed. If that existed in Hitlerian Germany, there is no conversation. King is dead. Ghandi is dead. Next... So that the predicate for their ability to oppose and rebel against political tyranny in the name of liberty was based upon the fact that the society in which they lived gave credence to those libertarian ideas. So, you are absolutely right to point out the tension between those two ideals and you are absolutely right. In one sense we live the conflicts, we live the tensions. I don't think we can ever resolve on the one hand individual freedom, that's why I talked about the tension as you brilliantly point out, between freedom and equality. Because freedom on the one hand is about the pursuit, unfettered, of the ideals by which one chooses to live one's life. Equality on the other hand is about making sure that the society in which we flourish allows that same potential to exist to each individual. Now, all kinds of arcane philosophical distinctions have been made about equality of opportunity or equality of outcome, we don't want to go there. The point is, that in that libertarian viewpoint, that Weltanschaung as we might say philosophically, the reality is that libertarian ideals on the one hand, commitments to society or norms on the other hand, certainly are contradictory and conflictual but they are the necessary tensions by which we define the possibility to engage in those libertarian ideals at all. So the ability to exist in a liberal society that we even criticize is based upon the fact that there is enough freedom in that society to absorb that criticism or to allow it to exist, while also addressing the need on the other hand to remain constant even in the face of such criticism or to reform itself or be changed, in light of that criticism so that those who oppose, I think, exist not diametrically opposed but certainly in powerful and sustainable tension. That's a very

powerful point and something we can't ultimately, I think, resolve only by this, and I'll be quiet, that for me an Raulsian notion, the Raulsian notion and that's one strand that would inform my thinking but certainly not exhaust it because I would be critical of certain Raulsian notions, so that for me when we're always talking about justice is fairness. You see justice is fairness means then we can't even have a notion of individual liberty without having a corollary conception of what un- liberty is about. That's why I began with Orlando Patterson. You can't even talk about freedom or liberty. Libertarian individualism was predicated upon the denial of that same quality and construct to a whole set of people called slaves in American society. That right there was the fundamental contradiction so Libertarianism itself is predicated upon a concomanent denial of that possibility being extended to that other group. But we can kick it later, that's a very brilliant point you brought up there.

Paddle#2: Sir, Cadet Munkin Company C4. My question was because of the importance of freedom and the importance of everyone being able to have freedom, whether in this country or countries across the world, do you think America's involvement in peace keeping operations is justified if their goal is to bring that freedom to other people?

Dr. Dyson:
That is another brilliant question. It's a very complex one. You know, I tend to be critical of American imperialism by which I mean the self-appointed stance of America often to be the more watchdog of nations when the very contradictions that our good young cadet in the first question talked about the ideals of America on the one hand being intention, that we want to protect freedom and democracy for the whole world while some of those very freedoms are being treacherously transgressed on right here in America. On the other hand, being a critic of American imperialism doesn't mean that we don't have American responsibility, which is what I think your question points to.

That responsibility is a very case by case basis. Very circumstantial. For instance, I thought that if we were going to intervene in the Serb-

Croatian affair and in the face of undeniable holocaust situations where genocide is being practiced, then what was up with Rwanda and that situation there with the Tutsis and the Hutus? What's up with that? Right? You know, I'm trying, what's up, how can we go into one place and not the other? And how can we bring in a whole lot of folk over here, right? Serbian -Croatian names ain't no play-hatin' at all goin' on there, but you know the Rowandas ain't being brought into the homes like other people were put up, refugees, immigrants here. So when I begin to ask questions about America's impulse to be protective, protecting who? And why? And for what reason?

Now, it would be rather simplistic some would argue that we could reduce it to an issue of skin color and race, although I think that was a crucial part of the entire project, but it was also about, you know, folks that we feel invested in that look like us, that we feel we know, and that we can use for ultimately political purposes right? And that they are allies of ours in the European theater and the G-7 nations and so on and so forth, or NATO alliances and pacts. So for me, the question about American protectionism is always at root a question about American priorities and those priorities are driven unfortunately for a variety of reasons, whether it is about oil in one nation, whether it's about diamond mines in another nation. I mean if we were gonna intervene, what happened to Americas intervention in behalf of Mr. Nelson Mandela, who stayed in prison for 27 years on Robin's Island. 75% of that population was black, 25% was white and yet they had no, speaking of those Africans, any legal right under apartheid to exist freely and equally. So, my question is that yes, as America goes around the country, it does have a moral obligation as a super power, as now the super power, no longer sharing this with the former Soviet Union. World War II, America becomes the supreme world power then later on during the Cold War, competing with Russia for world supremacy and now with the decline of and the internal, if you will, disintegration of that Soviet Union, America rises and emerges as, once again, the supreme world power. We certainly do have a moral obligation to politically protect people from tyranny. The question is, under what

circumstances does it exist, how do we make those decisions and how do we equally apply the litmus test for what's good and not good, what should be intervened upon and what should not be intervened upon, and why. But I do think we have a moral obligation to do so without those paternalistic implications and without those imperialist implications where true justifiable intervention exists, America should exercise that cause; where the soul purpose of such intervention is the expansion of American opportunity or to protect American interests, I think we have to raise serious and critical scrutiny about such intervention. Thank you so much for your question.

Paddle #1: Sir, Cadet Cargis Company Hotel 2. I'm intensely, morally opposed to homosexuality and therefore would you then contend that because of my intense moral opposition to this practice that I am violating the freedom of those who choose to be homosexual and therefore labeling me as a bigot?

Dr. Dyson:

That's a brilliant point. (laughter) Nah, no I don't think moral opposition, or as you say intense moral opposition, to homosexuality is not what I quibble with. I think that none of us can impose upon another human being what their perspective ought to be about particular sexual, moral, and ethical practice. Right? So that's not the problem. The problem I have is when that particular feeling, that intense opposition, has been codified in Am society as a bias and a prejudice and a trend already. That's what I meant earlier when I was too abstract about this point, forgive me, I said some speeches protect and some speeches not protected or the same thing said about one group doesn't have the same consequences when being said by another. So that for instance, in a society that is already prejudiced against gay and lesbian people and we know that when we say gay and lesbian as opposed to homosexual that's already a political tag, right? African Americans may be an ethnic description where black is a political choice or for that matter so is African American. But when you talk about gay and lesbian, that's a self description of gay and lesbian people who have chose to see themselves or view themselves as a prisoner of their own sexual orientation. Now in

American society where we have bigotry and prejudice often already against gay and lesbian people and Howard Thurman said a bigot is a person who makes an idol of his or her commitment right, so that they are so rigidly fascinated with their own viewpoint that they can ill afford another viewpoint. So its not that your intense opposition to homosexuals makes you somehow opposed to their freedom is that when that intense opposition begins to take social and political manifestations takes on a social manifestation that says that they don't have the same ability to exercise their freedom as you do.
And so as a heterosexual as I am, the vehement heterosexual and that you are (laughter). OK, no doubt the reality is that I want the same freedom to be extended to a gay or lesbian brother and sister as me. And so heterosexual brother over here, now that means for me that if a heterosexual can operate in the Army, in the Marines, in the Navy, in the Air Force and not have references to his or her sexuality be legally discussed, except incases of sexual harassment where the exercise of power in conjunction with sexuality has become an object of scrutiny, the reality is just the fact that one exists as homosexual or a gay or lesbian person should not be the predicate for discriminating against them or distinguishing them from the sub set of their cadets in their Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines.

Now there are many argument to be made that says look we're in a situation where the dependence upon fraternity or sorority and a kind of trust among compatriots is the very practice, is the very litmus test, for whether one can be effective or not because if you were somehow blocked by your own prejudice against a gay person they will not ultimately be successful because you might have some response in a war time situation or intense situation where you might respond to them because you are distracted by the fact you know they are gay. Well you know the same argument was made about African American people. The problem is that the same argument, the same character, the same quality, the same category of arguments was made to keep African American people out. When Harry S. Truman was arguing about the participation of African Americans in the war and Eisenhower and subsequent other

presidents were arguing and debating about this the reality is that the very same argument being made against gay and lesbian brothers and sisters now were being made against blacks then. Of course you couldn't ask Dori Miller "Don't ask, don't tell", a big black man standing before you "Let me see, I think he might be a brother but I don't want to ask. (Laughter).

A lot of black folks want to be on the "Don't ask, don't tell" basis on their race. But everybody can't be Tiger Woods. See the point is here--(Laughter)—love that brother—so the reality here for me is this: that when we look at the class and categories of arguments being made against gay and lesbians people it is the same set of arguments given to being against them as against other racial and gender minorities I think we ought to be suspicious and skeptical. It doesn't mean that you don't have a right and freedom to exercise your opinion but to what degree should the exercise of your free opinion about a gay or lesbian person be taken on as official policy of the military. Now let's be honest here. The fact is that these things evolve and change. What was once a policy of military that people were willing to die for changed over 15, 20, or 25 years. I was talking to the Colonel today and he was telling me that in his own graduating class there were 45 people in the transitional class, right? Now that's back in 1973. Now we have on average a hundred African American people per class. If the Army was right then when they had no Negros or after brother Flipper had been in a long time, what made them change? Was it God coming down or was it the evolution of belief, the evolution of thought, or was it the evolution of enlightenment where people began to see that my own prejudice was road blocking the ability to see my intense bias and opposition to, and they're not the same thing but in the case African American people the intense opposition to them was predicated upon a social bias. But that social bias was normalized. Many people don't even realize or recognize that some of the viewpoints they have had been so deeply ingrained in them that they are made to seem natural. It is natural to be heterosexual; it is unnatural to be gay or lesbian. It's natural to exist in a certain society where you face certain things. It's unnatural to do other things. So the point is, that in American society and indeed western society in

general, the argument about intense opposition to homosexuality and indeed throughout the globe but especially here in the west is the argument about the power to define the body and where that body can be located and how it is transgressive. To me, the bottom line is---some people use to say, "I can hate the sin and love the sinner". Now besides being quite paternalistic and presumptuous as if we mere human beings can identify what that sin is in terms of one's own gay or lesbian sexuality, the point is about gay or lesbian brother I don't like what you do, I like who you are. I am not trying to reduce the complexity of homosexuality to how one practices sex but that way may work for the Klu Klux Klan when you say I hate what David Duke represents but I love him as a person you can't say that about a homosexual or gay person even though they are obviously people who are or who refrain from having sex with people who are gay or lesbian n terms of their orientation but how we know the transgression of homosexuality is by its practice. And that practice cannot be separated from their identity as persons. And do either we are willing to see the legitimacy of another person's activity and not without criticism, not without scrutiny, but that is the criticism and scrutiny that we all should be subjected.

Here we are concerned about the practices of gay and lesbian people in the military, so paranoid of being driven by a stereotype in the military, in the church, in the home and yet we exist in the culture everyday that is so deeply misogynistic toward the women who are part and parcel of our American society. So even as men participate in a culture of misogyny, the cruel hatred of women, sexism which sentiments expressed against women or patriarchy which is the systematic expression of men's perspective as normal here we are talking that for granted everyday and yet we are being in one sense deeply problematic and moved by the possibility of serving along side a gay or lesbian brother or sister. The litmus test should be, can you shine your shoes? Can you shoot a gun? Can you stand up there and defend me if I'm in a fox hole? If somebody is trying to murder me can you stop them from doing it? Can you be respectful? Can you say "yes Sir" and "no Ma'am"? If you are gay, lesbian, transvestite, trans-gender, if you got

those kinds of skills, we looking for you. That's what the Army ought to be saying. (Laughter)

But I know I didn't answer your question fully but we can kick that later too though brother.

Dr. Dyson, we have a gift for you and the Class President Cadet Joe DiSilva would like to present this to you.

Cadet Joe DiSilva: Sir, on behalf of the Class of 2002, I would like to thank you for your inspirational and, at times, humorous, words this evening. I would like to present you with this clock as a token of my appreciation.

The inscription reads "Dr. Michael Erik Dyson – Sol Feinstone Lecturer – Meaning of Freedom - United States Military Academy 2000.

Thank you Sir.

Dr. Dyson: Thank you.

SOL FEINSTONE'S CREDO

DEDICATED TO

The Judeo-Christian commitment of self-sacrifice for peace on earth, and the brotherhood of free nations of free men;

The Spirit of '76, a struggle of free men to remain free

The immigrants who came after the revolution and helped build our country in freedom;

The underprivileged of all races who, by uplifting themselves, will raise all mankind to a higher humanity.

MY DEFINITION OF FREEDOM

In the beginning there was a void of sameness; the spark of life made everything different.

The stamp of sameness is the stamp of death.

Freedom to me means a social order based on individual freedom to live differently and to dream differently. I dream of a Brotherhood of Free Nations of Free Men.

SOL FEINSTONE

Past Feinstone Lectures

1971 – General Harold K. Johnson
1975 – Rear Admiral Jeremiah A. Denton, Jr.
1976 – Herman Wouk
1977 – Sidney Hook
1978 – Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.
1979 – Barbara W. Tuchman
1980 – Alistair Cook (Feb)
1980 Isaac Bashevis Singer (Sep)
1981 – Carl Sagan
1982 – George F. Will
1983 – Hanna H. Gray
1984 – Milton Friedman
1985 – Daniel Patrick Moynihan
1986 – Tom Wolfe
1987 – Elie Wiesel
1988 – A. Bartlett Giamatti
1989 – Dr. Richard Selzer
1990 – Dr. John Stoessinger
1991 – Fred Friendly
1992 – Dr. Orlando Patterson
1993 – Terry Anderson
1994 – Ambassador Madeleine K. Albright
1995 – Dr. Doris Kearns Goodwin
1996 – Dr. Stephen Jay Gould
1997 – Pete Seeger
1998 – Chief Judge Richard P. Matsch
1999 – Ross Perot