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Challenge:
A New Vision of Our
Future**

By Michael R. Winston

I: The Foundation

Fisk University was founded at the conclusion of this nation's greatest crisis by men who believed in the sacredness of the individual human being as such, who believed that the possibilities of the human mind and spirit were not limited intrinsically by race or color, by class or even the terrible weight of history.

Looking squarely in the faces of former slaves and the children of slaves, the founders dreamed boldly of a future in which their faith in equality, in democratic education, in new vistas of the spirit would be vindicated by the achievements of thousands of alumni descended in an unbroken chain from those first eager students in the military hospital barracks in 1866.

That was a radical faith in the years of Fisk's birth. It is not believed with much conviction to this day by a substantial number of Americans and Europeans. But the facts are there. Erastus Milo Cravath's hopes, the courage of the American Missionary Association, the determination of the Freedmen's Bureau, and the profound belief of Black people in higher education, have all been vindicated by the solid achievements of graduates of Fisk University and its more than 100 sister institutions.

Vindication of that faith has required sacrifice; it has required men and women to be at the storm centers of controversy; it has required that Fisk be no stranger to crisis or conflict. Yet history shows that opposition has been overcome, crises have been mastered, the forces of progress have prevailed over those of despair, stagnation or reaction.

Fisk University stands today as a monument to a great intellectual and social heritage, a vital center of higher education that has not only represented a distinct point of view in liberal learning, but also an overarching commitment to serve society. It can scarcely be doubted that Fisk's success is rooted in a social soil that however rocky or uncompromising it may appear at times, responds to cultivation and dogged commitment.

Fisk is older than most American colleges and universities—older for example than the University of California, Syracuse University, The John Hopkins University, Stanford University, the University of Chicago, Bryn Mawr College, Reed College or Brandeis University. From its earliest days, it has been noted as an outpost of educational excellence in the former slave states. In 1870, Dr. Barnas Sears, a former president of Brown University and the general agent of the Peabody Fund, said that after visiting many white and Black institutions, Fisk was the best normal school he had seen in the South.

From 1870 to the present, Fisk University has been an acknowledged leader in Black higher education, maintaining high standards in defiance of material circumstances. With such historic assets as these, Fisk need not take second place to any institution in confidently charting its future.

II: The Future

Although I am an historian, I wish to address not Fisk's past—as instructive and inspiring as that is—but rather the role of Fisk in the nation's future. I am not considering, quite frankly, *whether* Fisk will have a bright future, but thinking rather about *how* its future, in intellectual terms, may surpass all that is great in its past. I say "in intellectual terms" because at bottom it is the life of the mind that must have ultimate claim on Fisk, or any other institution of higher education.

All of the financial, physical and human resources of the institution, however great or small, must in the final analysis be

judged by how they contribute to learning—that invisible activity that is the heartbeat of a college or university. Viewed from that perspective, we see at once that *quality* will count more than quantity. Equally important will be the values that direct the institution's intellectual commitments establishing a hierarchy of distinctive curricular choices.

The future will be bright for those colleges that are responsive to the urgent need felt by a new generation for coherence, for a means to make sense out of a chaotic world not only out of control, but increasingly devoid of meaning and shared values.

What, in intellectual terms, will Fisk stand for 20 years hence, in the early years of the 21st century? I ask this question because it is my view that the future of Black colleges and universities has been discussed almost exclusively in terms either crudely material or heavily social. Whether, for example, there will be adequate financial support, or if a partially desegregating society will be destructive or supportive of such institutions. I do not, of course, deny the relevance or importance of these questions, only their primacy and the degree to which they might unwarrantably dominate our thinking about the future.

We are living through a period of fundamental change, one that is buffeted by the confluence of many accelerating political, economic and technological forces that are daily transforming the world. One is reminded of Emerson's striking statement at the heart of his Phi Beta Kappa address of August 31, 1837, "The American Scholar," in which he says:

If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.

A good time; if we but know what to do with it, to reach beyond the troubling surface phenomena to the fundamental causes of things. Is that not the insistent, profound obligation of intellectuals in our time, or any time? The multiple uncertainties that we are forced to acknowledge have had an especially devastating effect on Americans and Europeans, partly because there has been a refusal to come to terms with the implications of a revolutionary era in which the inexorable drift of change is not in their favor, as in the 19th century, but emphatically otherwise.

One of the most acute observers of contemporary political and social trends said to me not long ago that from his perspective, Western Europe and the United States are in a state of decline, marked by a loss of imaginative leadership in the critical sectors of society. An especially noticeable drift toward defeatism and escapism is common on both sides of the Atlantic. What is perhaps most surprising is that this phenomenon is more evident among younger people than their elders.

In Europe defeatism may be greater, while in the United States escapism in various forms, including the frantic pursuit of narrowly defined success and wealth, may be more pronounced. Whether this drift is a temporary aberration, or a steadily accelerating trend, is a matter of prophecy.

III: Global Concerns

Since I have neither the desire nor the competence to wear a prophet's mantle, I shall attempt to analyze what I think are some of the causes of the present malaise of what was once hailed as a new "Atlantic Civilization" destined to lead the world.

First, I should say that some of the decline cited by critics is not absolute, but only relative to the spectacular—and for many of us, problematic—advances of the non-Western world since the end of World War II. A widely held fantasy in the United States and Europe is that global power relations in 1945 should be taken as the norm or baseline for judging such matters.

From such a vantage point, of course, it appears that the trend has been steadily downhill, because the non-Western world was then still largely colonized and dependent; the Soviet Union was devastated by the war, and Europe, with some exceptions, was a vast ruin, physically, economically, and socially; China and Japan, the great powers of East Asia, were also wracked by years of revolution and war with consequences even more drastic than Europe.

Only the United States emerged from the nightmare of World War II stronger, stable, expansive, a new colossus in the global power struggle. There are still many Americans who regard that historical moment as the benchmark of America's true place in the world. I have a contrary view, believing that the readjustment of relations between the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia was inevitable and desirable.

Those who have pursued a *Pax Americana* under the cover of "security" or blind anti-communism have done, I think, enormous damage to our society, and not incidentally, much of the rest of the world. The Viet Nam tragedy was only the most spectacular blunder of this outlook and the policy that flowed from it. An arms race costing the United States alone more than four trillion dollars since 1950 has been the necessary concomitant of attempting to preserve a power balance resembling the status quo of the post-World War II years.

In this year of severe budget cuts in human services, for example, our military expenditures are staggering to contemplate: B-1 bombers cost \$300 million each; there are \$29.5 billion worth on order. M-1 battle tanks cost \$2.7 million per tank. The Nimitz Class aircraft carriers cost \$17.5 billion each, fully equipped and escorted. Of course these are only examples; the full range of arms expenditures is more comprehensive.

Perhaps more serious than the catastrophic waste of resources for maintaining an illusory security based on preponderant

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military power, has been our declining capacity to think clearly about the world we share with nearly five (4.7) billion human beings.

The United States is in danger of being locked into a "fortress mentality," seeing most of the world, which is poor, arrayed against us, the rich. This point of view imagines that the key problem in the world is the military balance of terror between the superpowers and their dependents. It ignores the fact that a series of revolutionary changes since the 1940s has transformed the crucial question from which nation is militarily dominant to how shall we and our children's children live?

More than half the world's population lives in five countries—China, India, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Indonesia. Three of the five are desperately poor. The world population has grown by one billion people since 1970, most of them in impoverished countries with a large percentage of their population under 25. The millions upon millions of the poor in Africa, Asia and Latin America seek the most elementary decencies of life—adequate food, shelter and productive work. They care less whether the ruling regimes are capitalist or socialist, parliamentary democracies or dictatorships than they do about the driving urgencies of day-to-day existence. How many Americans understand this?

The failure to understand is not restricted to this country. In 1978, global military spending amounted to \$425 billion—more than \$1 billion a day. How tragic it is that even in many of the poorest countries a shockingly high percentage of income goes to purchase military hardware.

36 Sales of military equipment are larger than the national incomes of all but 10 nations in the world. As Fritjof Capra has pointed out in his book, *The Turning Point*, while this level of military expenditure is being sustained, more than 15 million people—most of them children—die each year of starvation and 500 million are grossly undernourished.

"Almost 40 percent of the world's population has no access to professional health services," he writes, "yet developing countries spend more than three times as much on armaments as on health care. Thirty-five percent of humanity lacks safe drinking water, while half of its scientists and engineers are engaged in the technology of making weapons."

These weapons, excepting the nuclear arsenals, are not idle. One fourth of the world's nations are engaged in war—in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

The tragedy of world poverty increasing simultaneously with militarization is clearly not to be laid exclusively at the door of the United States. But it would be a mistake to minimize the impact our policies have had in raising the stakes, drawing the future of mankind into a deadly game dominated by a few superpowers.

IV: Anti-Intellectualism

I do not believe that the current state of affairs is the product of conspiracies by arms manufacturers or madmen who want to blow up the world. The real problem lies deeper. We have lost, I think, our capacity to respond effectively to radically altered world and domestic conditions because we continue to apply outmoded patterns of thought to new circumstances. To say it more sharply, there has been more of a failure of *ideas* than a failure of will or nerve.

You will recall, during the debate about the Viet Nam War, the conflict seemed to resolve itself into a question of our national will or nerve, rather than the interests of principles at stake. This was merely a

symptom of a more general problem—the willingness, now habitual, to *substitute slogans for thought*. This addiction, by no means restricted to international affairs, has transformed beyond recall a multiplicity of social, cultural and political endeavors by the potent combination of a suggestive slogan taken up by the mass media and a sufficient number of vehement adherents.

Power to the people; women's liberation; Black Power; integration; free enterprise; anti-elitism; back to basics; right to life; freedom of choice; busing;—all of these—symbolize movements, problems and fundamental social change that have received remarkably little independent or fresh thought.

We package and sell political candidates, rather than genuinely debate issues. Images become substitutes for reality.

We are only beginning to recognize the costs or long-term consequences of not considering our problems and proposed solutions in a framework of ideas rather than the cant of advertising. We "package" and "sell" political candidates, rather than genuinely debate issues. "Images" become substitutes for reality. This pernicious habit has spread from politics to academic life, to business, the professions and other critical sectors of society.

The tangle of causes that created this situation is obviously complex, and I shall not attempt to unravel all of them here. Some of it is attributable, in my view, to the pervasive anti-intellectualism in American life that the late Richard Hofstadter analyzed in a soon forgotten book by that title. There are also the masked pressures toward conformity in American society discussed more than a century ago by Alexis de Tocqueville and by such contemporary sociologists as David Reisman and the late C. Wright Mills.

There is less and less tolerance for the independent thinker or the unconventional *idea*, despite the dramatic increase of tolerance for unconventional life styles. Perhaps most startling of all, at least to me, is the fact that creative, independent or unconventional thought appears to be no longer expected from intellectuals or the academic community.

In a number of disciplines and professions, there is evidently a "party line" supported by powerful organizations who lobby the government to impose their established doctrines on a society in dire need of constructive intelligence unfettered by custom or dogma. Consider, for a moment, how we have bungled our response to the urban crisis: the same disastrous policies pursued since the New Deal—highway interests, architects, planners, governmental officials, all seemingly locked in the grip of a few largely unexamined ideas of what is wrong with our cities and how to remedy it. Pitifully few breakthroughs in urban architecture have replaced the elegant brutalism of Le Corbusier and Marcel Breuer. Our cities are filled with misguided derivations of the so-called "international style" and its simplistic assumptions about what human life is all about.

In the area of health services, to mention another obvious disaster, the United States has the most costly but inadequate system of any industrialized country. To cite only one further example, I ask: On what thoughtful premise did the United States launch the multibillion dollar space program? Why did a trip to the moon make for sounder public policy than other options for those funds, such as decent housing, new towns, new urban transit systems, a new educational infrastructure, or rationally allocated medical care?

You may recall that we moved forward on that continuing adventure primarily through the stimulus of advertising and slogans about the new space age—as we left our problems here to go to the great *out there*, void, pristine, timeless, an escape from the

problems beneath our feet and before our faces.

Now, you may ask: What does all this have to do with Fisk University and its future in the world of ideas? Consider this: The world is more in need of truly educated men and women than at any time in recent memory. How will the American liberal arts institution transform itself to meet the need for a new vision of mankind's future? How will it transmit to students the best that is inherent in civilization, combined with a new sensibility and enhanced intellectual capacities that are equal to the awesome tasks ahead of us?

We must do no less in the coming decades than remake the world for it to be fit for the flourishing of humanity in all its rich diversity. That may sound unrealistic. Perhaps it is. But any hope for the future will be reducible in some way to the possibility that change will emerge from new ways of thinking, new habits of mind, renewed disciplines of the spirit. There is no law of mind that bars Fisk University from leading the way. In fact, the new modes of education are far more likely to come from smaller, independent institutions than huge multiversities propelled by unrelenting external pressures for immediately useful research and fresh supplies of trained personnel for the current technocratic system, driven more by organizational and entrepreneurial imperatives than human needs.

There is no reason why Fisk should not be a vital center for a renewal of independent thinking about higher education and the world it serves. Alfred North Whitehead, in his classic essay on freedom and discipline, said that education is "the guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life . . . the complete achievement of varied activity expressing the potentialities of [students] in the face of [their] actual environment."

May we not go a step beyond Whitehead and project a new environment that transcends the actual, for this institution to do for the early 21st century what its founders did

for the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

V: Education vs. Training

The fundamental characteristic of education is growth. It has little to do with *training*, which is concerned with technique or instrumentality. Many persons, including some who are academically gifted, think of their education as complete, or nearly so, when they conclude their degree programs. Perhaps this is even more true of those who enter certain demanding professions requiring enormous effort to qualify for practice.

We have lost our capacity to respond effectively to radically altered world and domestic conditions because we continue to apply outmoded patterns of thought to new circumstances.

I have observed for example, that many professionals regard keeping up with the literature of their fields as continuing their education. I suggest that this is not the case—they are sustaining their specialized knowledge and training. Seldom does this in itself expand the mind, cause it to grasp problems in new perspectives. This is part of a larger paradox: when one begins a specialty or profession one's competence is based largely on mastery of technique and detail. As one rises in the profession and one's responsibilities expand to embrace more general and complex issues, one's effectiveness will tend to depend less on specialized knowledge, though that remains important, and more on a mature, seasoned and thoughtful grasp of general ideas, principles, and theories reaching far beyond the necessary but artificial boundaries of academic or professional disciplines. It is at this juncture that many superbly trained technicians become disastrous leaders or managers—because they are at sea in the realm of general ideas.

Also, it is at this point that many well-trained persons show either their lack of education, or that their education stopped dead in its tracks at their college commencement. They often embrace absurd dogma or third-rate or simplistic ideas to meet the bewildering complexity before them.

What I have described is not an isolated phenomenon, but a pervasive problem in our system that cannot be solved by changing structures or modifying incentives. This must begin by a new understanding of the need to continue to grow intellectually, to reach beyond mere training for the more difficult goal of understanding. □

See editor's note on page 33.