

Christopher Flannery

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He has served as a member of the California Department of Education Review Team for Draft National Standards for Civics and Government, and as a consultant to the California Department of Education with respect to civics education and textbook assessment.

QUESTION: How does this understanding of the liberal arts connect or not connect with your understanding of business education?

Liberal Arts and Liberal Education¹

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Our Greatest Need

Students entering college are frequently more concerned with how to make a living than with how to live a good life. The two things are related, and a complete education should prepare them for both, but liberal education is concerned primarily with the latter of the two. It is concerned not primarily with the acquisition of technical skill—job training—but with learning how to live well. What is the distinction between technical training and liberal education, and why is it essential for students entering institutions of higher learning to understand this distinction?

A passage in Martin Gilbert's monumental biography of Winston Churchill suggests an answer to these questions. There we are reminded of a grim episode in modern history that we forget at our peril. In the autumn of 1942, in the midst of world war, information was smuggled out of Nazi Germany through neutral Switzerland revealing to the outside world "the extent of the German slaughter of Jews on the eastern front, the murder by gas of Polish Jews in three special 'death' camps at Chelmno, Belzec, and Treblinka, and of the deportation of Jews from France, Belgium, and Holland to an 'unknown destination' in the East."¹

It was only two years later that this 'unknown destination' was identified as Auschwitz, where Jews were being gassed at the rate of about 12,000 men, women, and children a day. As Churchill wrote at the time, this was "probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world, and it has been done by scientific machinery by nominally civilized men."² The German people were the most technically advanced—one might say highly educated—people in the world at that time. Doctors, nurses, psychologists, educators, scientists, engineers, accountants, lawyers, and the whole array of other highly skilled and "nominally civilized" men and women, were devoting their considerable skills, acquired at great effort and expense, to the extermination of a people.

The twentieth century, the most technologically advanced century in history (until the twenty-first), with more technically skilled people per square mile than could once have been imagined, stands out as a century in which genocide was a term with which every grade school child must become familiar. As communism continues to take its uncertain and much awaited departure from the world, let us not forget the horrors of the Gulag Archipelago, the Bolshevik extermination of the Kulaks, the millions sacrificed to China's political experiments, and of course the "killing fields" in Cambodia—all in the name of scientific socialism and progress, but in fact amounting to a new phenomenon in the world: scientific savagery. More generally, if less dramatically: human beings throughout history have proven as apt to use their acquired skills to

¹ *On Principle*, V6N3, June 1998. This essay is adapted from a chapter in *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education*, edited by Diana Glyer and David Weeks (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998). Updated September 2004.