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Hillsdale College Ph.D. Candidate Colin Brown Presents Doctoral Research

Brown presented research from his dissertation on “Benjamin Franklin: Revolutionary Statesman.”

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Hillsdale College doctoral candidate Colin Brown gave a research presentation on his dissertation, entitled “Benjamin Franklin: Revolutionary Statesman” on Feb. 28. Franklin is often portrayed as a pragmatic statesman who went from a loyal Tory to a revolutionary republican based on circumstances, but Brown argued this view is incorrect. Brown gave his presentation after successfully defending his dissertation before a faculty panel.

While many theorists argue that Franklin’s views were skeptical and utilitarian, Brown argued that he was in fact a principled statesman whose apparent change of allegiance was based on his principles.

“Franklin’s statesmanship was informed by the radical Whig theories of social compact and natural right,” Brown said. “As a result, Franklin’s statesmanship was revolutionary, not in the sense of requiring revolution, although it did not preclude that, but in the sense of reforming the regimes he lived in along the lines of first principles. At the same time as it was revolutionary, it was also radically republican, as Franklin promoted and defended the liberty of the people to govern themselves.”

To demonstrate this, Brown considered three episodes from Franklin’s political career from 1747 to 1757: Pennsylvania’s defense crisis, Franklin’s conflict with Pennsylvania’s proprietors, and the issue of imperial reform that accompanied the debates over the Albany Plan.

“Although Franklin pursued immediate goals in each episode, such as security and defense, I argue that he also used each to pursue a more far-reaching and fundamental goal: to transform the regimes in which he lived in along more radically republican lines,” Brown said. “In other

words, by 1760, Franklin was very much a revolutionary in thought, if not yet so fully in deed, having already developed the central justifications of the American argument in favor of self-government the decade before.”

The presentation took place in Lane Hall and was followed by a brief reception. Kevin Slack, associate professor of politics, served as Brown’s dissertation chair and provided introductory remarks.

“In the field of political theory, leading scholars argue that Franklin is distinct for rejecting American founding principles. They say he rejected natural law, natural rights, the social contract, and even republican self-government by consent. But Colin Brown’s dissertation adds to a growing body of scholarship that disproves this view,” Slack said. “Colin Brown’s great contribution to scholarship is his application of Franklin’s republican principles of moral and political freedom to British imperial politics.”

Brown is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Mississippi’s Declaration of Independence Center for the Study of American Freedom. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Ave Maria University in 2012 and his Master of Arts from Hillsdale College’s Van Andel Graduate School of Statesmanship in 2016. Having successfully defended his dissertation, he will earn a Doctor of Philosophy in Politics and receive his diploma at Hillsdale College’s Commencement Ceremony in May 2025.

For a headshot of Brown, click [here](#). For Brown’s student profile, click [here](#). To view the poster for the event, click [here](#). For a high-resolution copy of the Hillsdale College clocktower logo, click [here](#).

About Hillsdale College Graduate School of Statesmanship

The Van Andel Graduate School of Statesmanship was founded in 2010 “to educate students in the language of American constitutionalism and to place its graduates in positions of public service in politics, in journalism, in the Academy, and elsewhere.” Its courses of study, which culminate in either a Master of Arts or a Doctor of Philosophy in Politics, are centered around the core texts from the Western and American traditions of political thought — what Thomas Jefferson called the “elementary books of public right.” All admitted students received a full-tuition scholarship and admitted Ph.D. students receive an additional living stipend. For more information, visit gradschool.hillsdale.edu.

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent, nonsectarian, Christian liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 6.7 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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