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CONTACT:
Emily Stack Davis
517-803-3745
PR@hillsdale.edu
Follow @HillsdalePR

Hillsdale College's Matthew Spalding Testifies Before Senate Judiciary Subcommittee

Spalding addressed the Declaration of Independence, American citizenship, and the principles of free government ahead of America's 250th anniversary.

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Matthew Spalding, Kirby Professor in Constitutional Government and dean of the Van Andel Graduate School of Government at Hillsdale College, testified Wednesday before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary's Subcommittee on the Constitution at its hearing, "Protecting American Citizenship IV: America 250 and Reclaiming American Citizenship."

Spalding's testimony examined the Declaration's legal and political significance, arguing that it is not merely an announcement of separation from Britain but a founding document that states the principles of American self-government.

"Understood this way, the Declaration of Independence is America's first constitutional document," Spalding said in his testimony. "The Declaration is not just a severance agreement but America's first 'founding' document, and it remains the defining statement of America's meaning and purpose."

The hearing was held in the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. Spalding testified as the subcommittee considered questions of citizenship and national identity in advance of the 250th anniversary of American independence.

In his testimony, Spalding traced the Declaration's origins in the work of the Continental Congress and argued that the Second Continental Congress was the first formal constitutional institution of American union and, for practical purposes, America's first national government. He said the Declaration brought together the Americans' grievances against King George III with a statement of principles about equality, natural rights, consent, and the proper ends of government.

Spalding also discussed the Declaration's relationship to slavery and abolition, noting that its assertion that all men are created equal became a political touchstone of the abolitionist movement.

"The Declaration of Independence is revolutionary, not because a particular group of Americans declared their independence under particular circumstances, but because they did so by appealing to — and promising to base their government on — a permanent standard of justice," Spalding said.

Spalding connected the Declaration's principles to American citizenship, arguing that civic identity must rest on common political principles rather than race, creed, or ethnic heritage. He said the country's founding principles shaped its treatment of immigrants and require a naturalization process that forms citizens capable of understanding free government and sharing in America's civic life.

"We are now in the 250th year of our country's life," Spalding said. "As a nation, we should take this unique opportunity not only to celebrate but also to relearn our history."

Spalding is the Kirby Professor in Constitutional Government, dean of the Van Andel Graduate School of Government, and vice president for Washington operations at Hillsdale College, overseeing Hillsdale's Washington, D.C., campus. He is the author of "The Making of the American Mind: The Story of Our Declaration of Independence."

For screenshots of Spalding's testimony, click here. Video and text of Spalding's testimony will be made available here. For a headshot of Spalding, click here. For photos of Hillsdale in D.C., click here. For photos of Hillsdale College, click here. For a high-resolution copy of the Hillsdale College clocktower logo, click here.

About Hillsdale in D.C.
Hillsdale College's campus in Washington, D.C., extends the College's educational mission to the nation's capital by teaching and promoting the principles and practice of American constitutionalism. As the home of the Washington-Hillsdale Internship Program, the James Madison Fellowship Program, the Van Andel Graduate School of Government, and a variety of lectures and events open to policymakers and the public, Hillsdale in D.C. seeks to inspire and form students, citizens, practitioners, and statesmen who will restore America's principles and revive self-government in the political life of the nation. For more information, visit dc.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 7.5 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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