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NOTES FOR RESPONDING TO DAVID SKAGGS' SPEECH

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Dynamic and often radical changes are occurring in the way our nation teaches the young, and not many of them have been well thought out. The tendency is to grab onto the handrails of a proposal as though it were a train leaving the station without being sure it is the right train or that it is going to the desired destination. Standardized testing incorporated into the No Child Left Behind frenzy is a good example. So is the 2006 report of the U.S. Department of Education entitled: A Test Of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education which while commendably criticizing this country's unequal access to higher education, came to a devastating conclusion about subject matter. It placed its entire emphasis on education for economic gain. Greedy for profit, the priority geared toward economic gain has resulted in the heedless abandonment of skills that are needed to keep this democracy alive. If this trend continues, our education system will be producing useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize public policies and understand the significance of other people's sufferings and achievements. What was once written about by George Orwell in his searing book, "1984," and Aldous Huxley in his classic, "Brave New World," is no longer science fiction, but instead a looming reality.

We should not be thinking about education as the production of economic worker units, but rather of the development of citizens who are able to think well about political and cultural issues, who can examine, argue, reflect and debate, respecting and mastering the art of reasoning rather than blindly adhering to authority and performing tasks for the economic benefit of others. Socrates really said it all in talking about the responsibilities of citizenship when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Let me say it another way: The responsibility of public education is not to produce people to fill jobs, but to produce citizens capable of governing themselves and choosing their own destinies.

For our democracy to thrive, education must produce in our children the ability to imagine and articulate a variety of complex issues affecting human life as it unfolds. Please understand, I am not suggesting by any means an educational system aimed at producing an intellectual elite, but rather a society in which all individuals can think about childhood, adolescence, family relationships, illness, death and the other aspects of life without being controlled by those who would manipulate them. For our democracy to survive, we must have a population that can judge political leaders critically with an informed and realistic sense of the possibilities available to them.

Distorting public education to produce results on standardized tests and regulating the content of classes to achieve high scores is not just catching the wrong train; it's heading in the wrong direction. I realize my final comment is hyperbole, but the exaggeration is intended to make the message clear: We need to spend more time, effort, attention and money on teaching all students to debate and communicate clearly and well than we presently devote to football and other varsity sports. In other words, public education is essential to the continuation of freedom and self-government. Comparing ourselves to ancient Rome and its decline and fall, our country today and for the foreseeable future must make the forum and not the coliseum its focal point. Imagine a world in which the captain of the debate team is more admired than the league-leading quarterback.