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Brian Flanagan
Grand Valley State University

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A Bold and Noble Project

The Life and Career of Theodore Hesburgh

By Brian Flanagan

In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin decided that moral perfection is unattainable. He attempted to cultivate in himself thirteen virtues and, failing, found fruit not in the outcome -- but in the endeavor.

"[T]ho' I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining," wrote Franklin, "yet I was, by the endeavour, a better and a happier man...."

Notre Dame's Theodore Hesburgh has striven toward a virtuous life, often finding satisfaction, as Franklin did, in setting out against long odds. "[W]e will never know what heights we can achieve," Hesburgh wrote in his autobiography, "unless we try."^[1]

Indeed, Father Hesburgh's career is proof of the fruit noble undertakings often bear. His life, whether consciously or not, has approached Franklin's ideal.

Industry

"Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions." -- Franklin



JFK and Hesburgh

demolished."^[2]

Hesburgh also managed to hold a steady helm at Notre Dame during one of the greatest trials American universities have ever faced -- the student unrest of the Vietnam-era.

Outside the university, he has accepted more than 50 federal appointments, including sixteen from nine U.S. presidents. His activities have involved him in many of the nation's most pressing issues, including civil rights, immigration reform, nuclear disarmament, and human development and social justice worldwide.

He has served as chairman of the Rockefeller Foundation, director of the Chase Manhattan Bank, president of Harvard University's Board of Overseers, chairman of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, and co-chairman of the NCAA's Knight Commission.

Father Hesburgh has served four popes -- three as a permanent representative in the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission. He represented the Holy See in the U.N., headed the Vatican delegation to the 20th anniversary of the Human Rights Declaration, and participated in Pope John Paul II's Pontifical Council for Culture. He founded Notre Dame's Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem at the request of Pope Paul VI.

Father Hesburgh is also a bestselling author of 4 books, holder of a world-record 150 honorary degrees, and winner of the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom -- the two highest civilian honors in the United States.

Resolution

"Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve." -- Franklin



Hesburgh and Ford ^[10]

great deal that informed his later work.^[4]

As his commitments outside of Notre Dame took shape over the following decades, five causes benefited most from his attention: "Peace in a nuclear age. Human rights and justice worldwide. Human development in terms of new economic, social, and political structures in the Third World. Ecology, the next great threat to the survival and development of humanity. Ecumenism, the bringing together in peace of all Christians...."^[5]

His resolve to affect change made Hesburgh an attractive servant to U.S. presidents. He helped Kennedy establish the Peace Corps by providing a pilot project in Chile that selected, trained, and provisioned the first Peace Corps volunteers. He also served on the president's Commission on International Educational and Cultural Affairs, a forerunner to the Commission on Public Diplomacy.

President Nixon appointed Hesburgh to the Overseas Development Council and the Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force. President Ford appointed him to the Presidential Clemency Board, considering clemency for Vietnam offenders, and President Carter appointed him to the Committee on the Holocaust and the National Cambodian Crisis Committee. In 1979, Carter became the first president to give a priest formal diplomatic authority: he named Hesburgh U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Conference on Science Technology for Development.

Perhaps Hesburgh's most significant Carter appointment was chairman of the Select Commission on



Hesburgh Links:

*Biographical:

[ND.EDU biography](#)

[NDNIS biography](#)

[Hesburgh.org](#)

*Notre Dame:

[Hesburgh Library / Virtual Tour](#)

[Center for International Studies](#)

[Center for Civil and Human Rights](#)

[Environmental Research Center](#)

[Ecumenical Institute](#)

[Program in Public Service](#)

[Hesburgh Collection](#)

[Hesburgh/Joyce Memorial](#)

[Hesburgh Lecture Series](#)

[Congregation of the Holy Cross](#)

*U.S. Presidents:

[All the presidents visits](#)

[16th presidential appointment](#)

[Act 1332, 106th Congress](#)

[Clinton speech](#)

[H. W. Bush speech](#)

[Reagan speech](#)

[Carter speech](#)

[Eisenhower letter](#)

*Interviews:

[News Hour, 2001](#)

[News Hour, 2000](#)

[Booknotes Interview, 1991](#)

[Greatest Moral Challenge, 1985](#)

[Peace, 1985](#)

"If I were sitting with Father Ted Hesburgh today, I'd simply say, 'Thank you, sir, for your service to our country, for your commitment to the Lord's work, for your commitment to world peace.'

"And then if I could get up my nerve, I'd say, 'You're a good man, Father Ted, and I've learned a lot from you.' "

--George H. W. Bush

"It's hard to remember what was happening back in the '50s and '60s in the civil rights movement. There were obviously a few African American leaders -- Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young and others. But they didn't have the fame or acceptance in the broad circles of white American political leaders they

Immigration and Refugee Policy, later called the Hesburgh Commission. The group included four members of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee (including Ted Kennedy), four members of the House Judiciary Committee, U.S. secretaries of state, labor, and health and human service, the U.S. attorney general, and Father Hesburgh. Together they delivered policy recommendations that became the basis for landmark immigration reform legislation enacted in 1986.

President George H. W. Bush appointed Father Hesburgh to the U.S. Institute of Peace board of directors in 1991, and President Bill Clinton appointed him honorary chairman of the U.S. Association for the U.N. High Council for Refugees. Most recently, President George W. Bush made Father Hesburgh a member of his Commission on Presidential Scholars.

deserved ...
"What they needed most of all was very distinguished white leaders who would join with them and add imprimaturs of approval in what they were doing. And Father Ted was one of those who came forward."

--Jimmy Carter

Justice

"Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty." -- Franklin

The work that made Father Hesburgh a national icon began shortly after his first presidential appointment. In 1957, President Eisenhower made him one of 6 charter members of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, where he served for the next fifteen years (four as chairman). With the Commission, Hesburgh traveled throughout the deep south, conducting hearings on voting rights, as well as "employment, housing, education, administration of justice, and public accommodations." [6]

Despite their own political and geographic divisions, the Commission managed to reach a consensus on most issues:

"When we met with President Eisenhower... he said he could not understand how a commission with three Democrats who were all Southerners, and two Republicans and an independent who were all Northerners, could possibly vote six-to-zero on eleven recommendations and five-to-one on the other," recalled Father Hesburgh. "I told Ike that he had not appointed just Republicans and Democrats or Northerners and Southerners, he had appointed six fishermen." [7]

As it turned out, Hesburgh had used Notre Dame acreage in Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, to wine, dine, and fish his opposition away.

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Father Hesburgh to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In fact, Father Hesburgh had coined the term "equal opportunity," suggesting to President Johnson that "nobody likes to be told he is part of a poverty program." [8]



Hesburgh and MLK

Humility

"Imitate Jesus and Socrates." -- Franklin

As president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, Father Hesburgh continues work at the age of 88. In a library named in his honor, he champions his five causes, involving himself in institutions he founded at Notre Dame: the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, the Center for Civil and Human Rights, the Environmental Research Center, and the Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem.

But when asked about his life's work, Father Hesburgh answers that he is an ordinary priest. He has celebrated Mass every day since his ordination in 1943, with few exceptions. He has celebrated Mass in airplanes, in a nuclear sub, on an aircraft carrier, and all over the world -- including the South Pole. He even celebrated Mass at a U.S. Air Force base while training to copilot a two-man SR-71 aircraft:



Clinton and Hesburgh

"I have said Mass with atheistic Russian Communists standing around the altar; with readers such as Rosalynn Carter and Robert McNamara; in an Anglican church that had not seen a Catholic Mass since the middle of the sixteenth century; in a dining car aboard a lurching railroad train; on all kinds of ships; in the middle of an African jungle; in thousands of hotel rooms in more than a hundred countries; and in all five languages that I speak. I even figured out a way to lay out a portable altar and say Mass in space, if and when I am ever chosen to ride the space shuttle." [9]

Although he was third on the waiting list behind Walter Cronkite and James Michener before the 1986 Challenger disaster, Father Hesburgh never made it into space. But he did break the world speed record in the SR-71, flying more than 2,200 miles per hour.

An ordinary priest.

The Hauenstein Center Leadership Academy is traveling to the University of Notre Dame next month to talk with President Emeritus Theodore M. Hesburgh about his career and service.

[1] Father Hesburgh's quotations appearing in this article are taken from his autobiography, *God, Country, Notre Dame* (New York: Ballantine, 1990). This particular quotation is on page 313 of the book. Other sources for the article include two short biographies published by the University of Notre Dame's Office of News and Information, President Bill Clinton's speech delivered on July 13, 2000, and Act 1332 of the 106th U.S. Congress.

[2] *God, Country, Notre Dame*, pp. 301-302.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 309.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 305.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 201.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[10] This photograph is courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.