

2002 Academic Convocation and Investiture

Dr. Robert M. Gates

President and Mrs. Bush, Senator Ogden, representative brown, members of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, chairman Nye and members of the Texas A&M system board of regents, Chancellor Graves, speaker of the faculty senate Strawser, members of the faculty, students, distinguished guests, friends and family, and especially my wife Becky and my mom, "howdy." Texas A&M university and I are honored by your presence here today.

Academic convocation is a growing tradition at our university and celebrates the unity of our academic community. I am honored that you have chosen this fall convocation as the occasion for my installation as the 22nd president of this great institution.

Over the years, I have told young people never to underestimate the power of serendipity—of fate—in their lives. I'm still not entirely sure how I came to be on this platform at this time for this purpose. The last thing I recall was telling the outgoing chairman of the board of regents in June of 2001 that there was no way on earth that I would consider being a candidate for president of a university, even Texas A&M.

Obviously, I changed my mind. After September 11, 2001, I felt obligated to undertake another public service, and I knew that Texas A&M—a unique American institution—was the only place in the nation I wanted to do it.

I have been reflecting lately on my good fortune in having the opportunity to lead two great American institutions, the central intelligence agency and Texas A&M university. I've also been thinking about which institution I would prefer to lead, and in a close decision, chose Texas A&M. But, after all, CIA doesn't have a band or a football team—at least not yet.

I've also been considering which is scarier—being responsible for several thousand clandestine agents operating around the world, or being responsible for 45,000 students 18 to 25 years old, all confined in a small geographic area. I think you know the answer to that one.

Over the last few weeks I have given a lot of thought to what I might say today that would have value or meaning for such a distinguished audience.

First, I want to speak about Texas A&M university and its future. Because I have discovered one thing Texas A&M has in common with CIA—they both have managed to keep much too secret their extraordinary achievements, capabilities and potential.

For our visitors, you are on the campus of the fifth largest university in the United States by enrollment. Texas A&M is among the top dozen universities in the country in attracting national merit scholars. We stand 11th in the nation in total expenditures on research. Members of our faculty have won virtually every prize for research and scholarly achievement, including the Nobel Prize, the

National Medal of Science, the Wolf Prize, and many more. Our endowment is the third largest in the country among public universities.

We have students from 115 countries and our researchers are active here in Texas, across the nation, and in scores of countries all around the world. Our outstanding faculty epitomize the importance of research education—where new knowledge from scholarship by leaders in their fields is intrinsically connected to teaching at all levels. Our research and teaching, firmly grounded in the land grant tradition, contribute countless benefits to economic development and the quality of life both locally and globally.

Texas A&M is the site of a major presidential library and museum, and we have aspirations for a second.

We have come a very long way from the tiny agricultural and mechanical college of Texas that opened its doors more than 125 years ago.

We have come a long way because the university has been blessed not only with exceptional students, but also blessed, at critical moments in its history, with courageous and visionary leadership—faculty, presidents and former students—who have guided our school through critically hard times, who have believed in what it could become, and who worked to make their dreams a reality. It has taken the devotion and sacrifices of generations of Aggies to bring us to this day.

In the last 40 years, Texas A&M has been transformed from an all-male military college of about 6000 students to a world-class teaching and research university where nearly half of the students are women. In modern times, Texas A&M university was revolutionized by general earl rudder, who developed our first strategic plan in 1962, the "aspirations study". General Rudder made the Corps of Cadets voluntary, opened the school to women, and recruited an extraordinary faculty that placed this university on the path to academic greatness.

The next step came 20 years later, in 1983, when President Frank Vandiver approved a new strategy, titled "Target 2000". And during the 1980s and 1990s, the university grew dramatically in faculty, students and facilities.

Then, some fifteen years later, my distinguished predecessor, Ray Bowen, along with some 250 faculty, students, administrators, former students and other friends of the university, developed a new strategy, "Vision 2020", that sets the goal of advancing Texas A&M into the ranks of the top ten public universities in the nation by the year 2020.

This is an audacious goal because of the challenges involved and because of the quality of our peer universities. But it was audacity—along with perseverance, dreams, courage and the unique spirit of Aggieland—that brought this university from a small college on a nearly barren plain to the huge, world-class university you see today.

In pursuit of vision 2020, we will elevate our faculty, improve our graduate and undergraduate programs, build the arts and sciences, further strengthen our professional education, diversify and

globalize our university community, improve our libraries and access to information technology, enrich our campus, build stronger ties to the community and to the state's metropolitan areas, increase our endowment, improve our governance, and better serve the State of Texas. And in achieving the imperatives of vision 2020, we will bring new commitment and heightened performance to our historic land-grant mission: teaching, research and service.

My highest priority, in partnership with the deans, the faculty and its senate, our students, our staff, our former students, private benefactors, and the state government, is to make significant progress toward achieving the imperatives of Vision 2020 in the next few years.

There are many obstacles in our path. Money comes to mind. But there have always been tough challenges for Texas A&M, and they have always been overcome. They have been overcome because of the Aggie spirit that makes this university truly unique. Thus, we must preserve our traditions and spirit in order to continue moving forward. It is the Aggie spirit that gives us the will and the power to make this great university even greater. And, indeed, progress in achieving Vision 2020 will give us exciting opportunities both to strengthen our hallowed traditions and to create new ones that will enrich our culture and our future.

In achieving the ambitious goals of vision 2020, we face real challenges. But, of course, each university and college in this country has its own, particular challenges. There is, however, one challenge we all face in common: we graduate too many very smart, very skilled men and women who are deficient in character and integrity.

When surveys suggest that nationwide 75 percent or more of high school and college students cheat, and when we see scholars plagiarize and lie about their backgrounds, I believe we as a people have a problem. When great companies are destroyed by the mendacity and greed of their leaders, when there are so many corporate scandals that a lack of confidence in the integrity of business leadership actually affects the performance of the national economy, I believe we as a people have a problem. When we see political leaders lying under oath and going to jail for corruption, when we see the resulting cynicism of many Americans about the character of their elected officials, I believe we as a people have a problem.

All of these liars and cheats and thieves are graduates of our universities. The university community cannot avert its eyes and proclaim that this is not our problem, that there is nothing we can do, or that these behaviors are an aberration from the norm.

Politicians who lie, business executives who steal, scholars and students who cheat, are far from new. But the frequency, the scale of such behaviors—and their social, economic and political consequences—may well be new. As is the apparent ease with which too many well-known people exhibiting such behaviors seem to get away with it even after public exposure. Clearly, these are object lessons not lost upon the public, and especially not lost upon the young. The consequences are self-evident, and tragic. And, worse yet, too many of all ages, when caught lying, cheating and stealing, seem to think that if they acknowledge the error of their ways and apologize, there should be no consequences—that everyone should just "move on" or should just "get over it".

Too many examples in too many areas of American life of a lack of integrity, of character —of what once was called personal honor—have begun to erode the trust that is the foundation of democracy and a market economy.

John Adams wrote, "the preservation of liberty depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the people. As long as knowledge and virtue are diffused generally among the body of a nation, it is impossible they should be enslaved." And Benjamin Franklin wrote, "only a virtuous people are capable of freedom." Universities cannot abdicate their responsibility to inculcate in students, faculty, administrators and staff ethical behavior and personal integrity—and to teach the importance of those qualities to an individual and to a nation. There is no university, no college, no major, no course, that does not offer countless opportunities to foster and to teach ethical behavior and integrity—and the consequences of their absence. We must regain and renew our commitment to the overriding importance of basic values and principles.

Most universities take seriously their responsibility to examine social pathologies and suggest remedies. Widespread lying, cheating and stealing—and resulting public resignation to and cynicism about such behaviors—represent an insidious social pathology. This university—and others — must do more to teach about the consequences for society of such pathology, and to teach the remedy. The remedy is greater emphasis in our universities on ethical behavior and personal integrity—at school and in life.

For Texas A&M, such an emphasis is consistent with all of our past, with our traditions, with our spirit, and with our Aggie code of honor: "Aggies do not lie, cheat or steal or tolerate those who do." An even more splendid reputation, a higher level of excellence—all of our goals for the future—can be achieved only on a foundation of ethical behavior and integrity.

In today's world, this may be regarded as a challenge. But it is a challenge we all must meet and overcome. We must forge a partnership of students and faculty, administrators and staff, with the aim of making the Aggie code of honor the core value of our university and in our personal lives. This is an Aggie tradition dating from our earliest days that we must strengthen, a fire we must re-kindle in our own hearts.

As I accept the signal honor of the presidency of this great university, it is with supreme confidence that we are all united in our commitment to these ideals.

In a novel, tides of war, set in ancient Greece, the author has the great Greek warrior and philosopher Alcibiades ask the question, "how to lead free men?" And he answers, "only by this means, the summoning of each to his nobility." Texas A&M university and other universities always have summoned individuals to excellence. By teaching the importance of high ethical standards—by teaching the importance of personal integrity —we summon our students, we summon each member of the university community, to his or her nobility.

And isn't this what a university should be all about—summoning all to excellence and to their individual nobility?

Thank you.