2005 Academic Convocation

Dr. Robert M. Gates

I am certain that our parading around campus in full academic regalia in near 100 degree temperatures has filled our students with confidence in our lucidity and judgment. I just hope we do not have any new faculty vacancies to fill as a result of our march.

As I begin my fourth year, it is clear I will not graduate from Texas A&M at the end of the year. And I confess even a six year graduation is looking shaky.

Almost two weeks ago, perhaps the worst natural disaster in American history struck the Gulf Coast. It is likely to be some time before we know the full magnitude of the loss. We do know that many lives have been lost and probably a million other lives disrupted, all too many catastrophically. Please join me in a moment of silent prayer for those who died and their families, those who have been injured, and those who have lost their homes and their livelihood.

This great University has risen to the challenge of helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina. From providing shelter, food, clothing, care and compassion for evacuees, to becoming a temporary academic home for hundreds of students from impacted colleges and universities in Louisiana and Mississippi, this entire campus has opened its arms and its heart. As so often happens, the long term impact may be greater on us than on those we served. Countless students, staff and faculty have contributed their time, their energy, and their joy in service to this humanitarian endeavor — and I believe each one who participated has been changed by the experience. Once again, Texas A&M has shown the Spirit that makes us unique.

Academic convocation at the beginning of the new school year is an opportunity to take stock of where we are and to consider our aspirations for the coming year and beyond. Far from slowing, the pace of change at Texas A&M continues to accelerate, and we are beginning to see the fruits of our labors. Our continuing, overarching objective is clear: to take every part of the University to a new level of excellence, while preserving and strengthening the traditions, the culture and the spirit that make Texas A&M University "a unique American institution."

During the past year, significant progress was made in all four of our priority endeavors.

**First, Elevating the Faculty:** As of September 1, 2005, we had created and funded 245 new faculty positions at Texas A&M in the last two and a half years. At last count, nearly 230 of those positions have been filled. We are more than halfway to our program goal of 447 new faculty positions within five years — that is, by 2008, and I thank the faculty for the enormous commitment of time and energy you have devoted to this historic endeavor.

Funding provided by the legislature, together with our recent tuition increases and internal University re-allocations, ensure that we will be able to complete the "most ambitious faculty expansion effort in America". The quality of our new faculty is extraordinary, including superb scholar/teachers from top
universities around the nation and the world. The quality and number of new faculty, added to that of our current faculty, will have a significant impact on the quality of education here. We already have lowered the student-faculty ratio from 21:1 to about 19:1 this fall. We have reduced the percentage of classes with 50 or more students from 33% to 24%.

The benefits of this unprecedented increase in the size of our faculty must be seen in the classroom, from new courses and smaller classes to more sections of high demand courses, more faculty time for mentoring and advising, and more. I am pleased to say that every college is "bending to the task," drawing up plans for more courses and sections, and other specific proposals for improving the quality of undergraduate education. The colleges also have identified cutting edge research programs where new faculty will help us sustain or develop national leadership.

Finally, this expansion program is affording us the opportunity to diversify a faculty that, until recently, was 85% white and 85% male. In 2003-2004, 36.4% of the new tenured/tenure track faculty hired were women, and 31.4% in 2004-2005. This compares to 18.2% women among our current instructional faculty when we began this faculty expansion. In fall, 2002, 16.4% of the tenured/tenure track faculty were ethnic minorities; in 2003-2004, 30.8% of our new faculty hires were minorities and, in 2004-2005, 28.6%. I congratulate the Colleges, the Departments and the faculty as a whole for the progress to date, but clearly we still have considerable distance to go.

**Second, Diversity:** With the help of virtually the entire campus community, and many former students, our efforts to enroll more minority students are proving successful. We have received especially valuable and important assistance from the Texas A&M Hispanic Former Students Network and the Black Former Students Network. As you know, I decided in December, 2003, that we would not use race or ethnicity in admissions, but instead would look to merit-based admissions combined with an "aggressive outreach and recruitment effort" to increase, in particular, the number of African-American and Hispanic Texas students at A&M. In January 2004, I announced that we would not use legacy in admissions.

Over the past 18 months or so, we have created a permanent recruitment infrastructure we believe to be unique in the nation. We now have Regional Prospective Student Centers in Dallas, two in Houston, San Antonio, Brazos County, Corpus Christi and McAllen, and we are planning an eighth in Laredo. We have both admissions and financial aid counselors in these centers, where they can establish long-range relationships with local counselors, teachers and principals, as well as work with individual families from every ethnic group and socio-economic background to show them how their son or daughter can apply to A&M and, if admitted, alternative ways to finance their education. The enthusiasm for Texas A&M on the part of high school counselors, teachers and principals, as well as community leaders, in cities where our Prospective Student Centers are located is both helpful and gratifying.

In addition, many programs have been developed or supported by student organizations, by the Admissions and Financial Aid offices, by the Texas A&M Foundation, by former students both individually and through the Association of Former Students, and by individual colleges and departments, to help recruit minority students. The results are in. Last fall, (a year ago), we increased Hispanic freshman enrollment by 25% and African-American freshman enrollment by 35%. This fall,
over 1000 Hispanic freshmen confirmed their intention to enroll, the highest number in Texas A&M’s history, and some 260 African-American freshmen have confirmed — the highest number since 1996. 28% of our freshman class of 7100 last fall and this fall are first generation college students — truly a fulfillment of our land grant history and heritage. This is one of the largest percentages of first generation college students in tier 1 research universities in America. "To those who say that higher education — and especially highly ranked national universities — are less able (or willing) to provide social and economic mobility for American students from lower income families, I say come and witness what we are doing at Texas A&M."

We also must be — and are — engaged in significant efforts to ensure that these students succeed academically. We are doing well — thanks to you and thanks to them— with overall freshman retention at almost 90%. The Aggie Access program has doubled in size and serves as a model retention program for the University, with a retention rate of 94%.

Admission of new African-American and Hispanic graduate students is growing as well — up significantly last year in percentage terms, and up again this year by about 5%.

Our success has brought us national attention. The Chronicle of Higher Education did a major article on A&M’s efforts last winter and the Christian Science Monitor, Houston Chronicle and other publications have praised our efforts. Perhaps more significantly, other universities around the country are asking us what we are doing to be successful — especially since more than a few top universities are experiencing an absolute decline in minority enrollment.

We mustn’t rest on our laurels. We need to keep working at this — and the involvement of so many faculty, staff, students and former students in helping us is deeply appreciated, and must continue. Further, we must sustain the re-allocation of resources internally to support both the recruitment effort and new scholarships targeted on first generation college students from lower-income families.

Third, Space: So, where are we going to house all the new faculty? The opening over the past year or so of both the Cox Wing of the Wehner Building and the new Jack Brown Chemical Engineering Building certainly have helped. During the past 18 months, under the leadership of the Council on the Built Environment chaired by Vice Provost Bill Perry, we have begun a major re-location of administrative and staff offices to the periphery of the campus in order to create space in the core of the campus for new faculty. We already have completed more than 40 moves involving 20 buildings. We will soon begin construction of a General Services Complex, an administrative building on Agronomy Road behind the Vet School, which will allow us to move a number of administrative activities from the central campus.

All that said and done, re-arranging the academic furniture, as it were, will not meet our space needs — for new faculty, for new laboratories, and for classrooms with the latest technology. Throughout the first two years I was here, I candidly confessed to you that alone among our four top priorities, I had no idea how we could fund additional new academic facilities.

Perhaps, the most astonishing development of the past year, and perhaps the most significant news I have for you today, is that we have acquired the financial wherewithal to begin almost immediately an
unprecedented construction program at Texas A&M -- with a total estimated cost of about $275 million. This includes four major new academic buildings. First, a new Life Sciences Complex at a cost of nearly $100 million. Second, a $50 million Emerging Technologies Building, which will be occupied primarily by the Dwight Look College of Engineering and its research partners.

In addition, we will be able to move promptly to construct two buildings for Physics. Completion of these two buildings, at a cost of some $57 million, will free significant additional main campus space for the College of Engineering and others. Meanwhile, we also are planning an expansion of the lab animal resource and research building, a nuclear magnetic resonance imaging building, and an addition to the Veterinary Medicine Research Tower.

You would be justified in asking where the money is coming from. Inasmuch as I had to leave my printing press behind at CIA, and the Chemistry Department still has not come up with a way to change lead into gold, we had to look elsewhere. The answer, in brief, is that the money is coming from the Texas A&M University System and from a major private gift. As I reported at last year’s Convocation, thanks to the work of Interim Chancellor Benton Cocanougher, in mid-2004 the System significantly increased our Available University Fund — AUF — allocation to allow us to build the Life Sciences Complex. Then, just a few months ago, Chancellor Robert McTeer most generously agreed to provide Permanent University Fund — PUF — bonds to finance that Life Sciences Complex, thereby allowing us to use the AUF money we had set aside for that facility to pay for Life Sciences for the Emerging Technologies building. The two Physics buildings will be paid through a combination of one-time University funds and a major private gift, which I hope we can announce in a week or two.

Based on our conversations with the Texas A&M University System, the four academic buildings will be constructed more or less simultaneously, and the largest, the Life Sciences Complex, could be complete as early as 30 months from now. So, enjoy the tranquility of the campus this fall and winter. It’s not going to last much beyond that.

The implications of our plans are, I think, national in scope. "At a time when many political, business and academic leaders are decrying the decline of science and engineering in American higher education, Texas A&M is stepping forward with bold plans — and the resources to support those plans — to increase our science and engineering faculty by nearly 200 and to construct new science and engineering research and teaching facilities valued at more than $200 million". These investments will not only significantly enhance science and engineering research and teaching at Texas A&M, but will firmly establish us as a leader nationally in these critical areas so essential for America’s future growth, prosperity and competitiveness.

**Fourth, Improving Undergraduate and Graduate Education:** Almost a year ago, I appointed a task force, led by former Interim Dean of Geosciences and Professor of Oceanography Dr. Mary Jo Richardson, to look at the entire undergraduate experience and make recommendations about how to make it even richer and more rewarding at Texas A&M. The Task Force, involving multiple working groups and many faculty, staff and students, completed its work on schedule in late May. It addressed the following issues: developing a common freshman year experience; learning communities; undergraduate research; leadership development; enhanced honors opportunities; enhanced course delivery (such as greater flexibility in scheduling, the use of technology, rewarding innovative
teaching, and so forth, summer school; the core curriculum; integrating the academic and extracurricular experiences; a general studies degree; and faster progress toward a degree.

This effort was one of the most far-reaching, integrated examination of the undergraduate experience at Texas A&M in a very long time. Our faculty reinvestment program will facilitate turning the ideas of the Task Force into reality. As colleges, departments and University administrators study the results and recommendations, and proceed with implementation, the impact on our undergraduates’ experience here will be dramatic. Two hallmark features of a Texas A&M education — leadership development and linking student learning experiences in the classroom with those outside it — are important points of focus of the Task Force’s efforts. But we are also using the findings of the Task Force to develop new approaches to undergraduate education at Texas A&M that will emphasize interdisciplinary studies and undergraduate research. Finally, I hope we will be able to give students a choice between a degree program aimed at professional proficiency and a well-rounded broader degree program meeting rigorous academic standards but largely custom designed to match the interests and strengths of each student. Either program would result in Aggies being even better prepared for "leadership in 21st century America."

We also have taken major long overdue major steps to improve the graduate student experience. Over the last two years, funding for graduate student-related initiatives increased significantly. However, effective this fall, in a major new initiative and enhancement of our graduate program, the University will pay tuition for all graduate assistants — both teaching and non-teaching. The estimated cost will be nearly $10 million, the money coming from combining resources available both in the colleges and in the University. We also have directed that faculty include in grant proposals tuition and fees for graduate students who will be participating in the grant research. These initiatives will make Texas A&M far more competitive for high quality graduate students and should contribute significantly to growing our graduate student numbers.

We’re also leading two new Texas A&M University System-wide programs — Pathways to the Doctorate and the Texas A&M University System Graduate Faculty — to make it easier for students from other Texas A&M System universities to transition to graduate study at Texas A&M. This program also affords us the opportunity further to improve our recruitment of African-American and Hispanic graduate students.

Finally, in the humanities, I am today announcing a series of Presidential Roundtables — two this fall and one next spring — which will bring together administrators, faculty and students to discuss 1) the value of the humanities for society at large, 2) the nature and challenge of humanities research, and 3) the future of humanities education. Our participation in this national initiative, undertaken by the Association of American Universities and the American Council of Learned Societies, recognizes both the critical role of the humanities in making us better people and more productive citizens, as well as the significant achievements made in the humanities here at Texas A&M over the last decade. Continued strengthening of the humanities at Texas A&M is an essential element of our effort to take the University to a new level of excellence.

While needless to say, there was change and progress in many other areas at A&M over the past year. Perhaps the most controversial issue on campus during the last year was a return to the expectation
that a full class-load means taking 15 credit hours each fall and spring semester. While we have the
best six-year graduation rate among Texas public universities (76%), according to the most recent
data, just 37% of A&M students graduated in four years. The average class load last year was just
above 13 hours per semester. There was, and continues to be, considerable pressure from the Texas
Legislature and our Board of Regents to change this — to improve time to graduation in order to
make room for more students.

If you go to a current University catalogue, you will see that almost every degree program — including
in Engineering — provides for taking at least 15 hours each semester and graduating in four years.
With our faculty expansion, I believe we can now deliver the courses necessary to support this. There
will undoubtedly be some hiccups as we implement flat tuition and try to get students to take at least
15 hours most semesters. That is why we have an appeals process. But students will also need to work
closely with their academic advisers.

To try to enumerate all of the other areas of improvement and success at Texas A&M would take
longer than anyone here will tolerate. So, let me mention just a few other developments.

In July, I advised the Board of Regents that the "One Spirit, One Vision" campaign led by the Texas
A&M Foundation had achieved its goal of $1 billion nearly 18 months early. I noted however, that the
victory had been uneven, and some colleges and programs still had some distance to go to reach their
individual goals. Also, several new initiatives — such as the faculty reinvestment program — have
been undertaken since the $1 billion goal was set. Thus, I encourage the Foundation and all of A&M’s
former students and friends to keep up the good work that has brought us so far.

We have successfully continued our efforts to keep administrative costs at Texas A&M the lowest (as a
percentage of overall expenditures) among all public universities in Texas. We have reduced
administrative and staff support by nearly 300 positions overall, outsourced support functions when
economically advantageous, developed business plans to get money-losing auxiliaries (such as Reed
Arena) at least to break even, and have re-structured a number of operations to make them more
efficient.

As we cut costs and strive to keep administrative expenditures as low as possible, I am quite mindful
that the negative impact of these measures falls disproportionately on our staff, especially on those
who have lost their jobs, but also on those who remain and whose morale has been affected by the
departure of friends and colleagues and by uncertainty about their own future. Those of us involved in
making these decisions are fully, painfully, aware of the human cost. All I can say, by way of
reassurance, is that while we will continue to evaluate our business practices and try to reduce
administrative costs wherever we can, I believe the lion’s share of job reductions are behind us.

A final thought. Our staff — our academic and student affairs advisers, administrative and clerical
support, safety and police officers, parking and transportation staff, those in food service, our
custodians and maintenance workers, and others — are critical to our success as a University. They
help our students, they protect us, they feed us, they keep our living and work space clean, they keep
our campus one of the most beautiful and well-kept anywhere. All of our new initiatives that hold so
much promise for the future could not and cannot be implemented without their skills, their service
and their caring. I ask faculty, administrators and students never to miss an opportunity to thank these hard-working Aggies for all they do for all of us. They are every bit as important to our future as anyone else on campus. They are an integral part of the Aggie family.

Our branch campus in Qatar is thriving as it enters its third year, with 146 students, 40% of them women. We have 22 faculty there, and had some 600 applications for the 60 or so freshman slots this fall. We will not be able to approach our planned enrollment of 400 students until construction is complete on our 450,000 square foot engineering building there in January of 2007.

Our branch campus in Galveston celebrated completion of its new Engineering building this year, as well as replacement of the venerable Texas Clipper II with a newer and larger ship. The Regents also approved a new vice president and CEO of the Galveston campus, Dr. Bowen Loftin '70. Dr. Loftin taught at Galveston early in his career, and returns to us from Old Dominion University in Virginia.

Texas A&M has some 3800 international students. Only ten other universities in America have more. They're an extremely important part of the University, and we are taking a number of steps to make them a more integral part of the Aggie family. These include designating this year as the "year of the international student," and the funding of new initiatives to take advantage of the educational opportunities presented by having one of the largest international student populations of any university in America.

Finally, last year, responding to the concerns of a number of our faculty, the Faculty Senate passed a resolution calling for a Living Wage for Texas A&M University employees. In response, I appointed a task force, led by Dr. Benton Cocalougher, to address the issue of staff wages and benefits. I not only accepted the Task Force's recommendations to raise the entry level wage, but increased it beyond their recommendation. Further, because of the importance of our staff, as I just discussed, I agreed with the Task Force recommendation that we be the "employer of choice" in the Brazos Valley in terms of both wages and benefits. Within budgetary constraints, we must make sure our staff are paid and treated properly. It is noteworthy that the entire faculty and administrative staff received lower merit pay increases this year in order to provide increased compensation to our lowest paid employees. This was a faculty initiative to help a critical part of the Aggie family, and I applaud those who led it.

Well, it was a busy year, but much work remains to be done. Much will be required of the faculty as we go out to fill the remaining 200 additional faculty positions, not to mention replacing those who retire or move away. Much patience will be required of all of us once construction of the new academic buildings get underway, because all of us will be inconvenienced for some period of time. And implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force on Enhancing Undergraduate Education and new ideas growing out of the Task Force's work will require the efforts of many faculty and staff.

As we move forward on so many initiatives, it is clear that the role of the faculty is critical. Over the past three years, we have involved the faculty in virtually every council, task force and other collaborative effort to address issues and hire administrators and deans. There has been no decision in which the faculty has not had a significant and influential voice. We have worked especially with the
Faculty Senate, its Executive Committee and Speaker, as well as the Distinguished Professors, the Council of Principal Investigators, and many faculty.

From time to time though, I hear from individual faculty members that none of these groups, nor department heads or deans speak for them. I believe you will not find a university president more willing to work with the faculty in decision-making than I am. But I cannot do so with more than 2000, and soon to be nearly 2500, individual faculty members. If shared governance is to have any meaning at all, it can only be done — in the main — through faculty organizations and especially the faculty’s elected representatives in the Faculty Senate. Those faculty unhappy with the Faculty Senate should run for office and, as an elected member of the Senate, work to improve it. Because, I assure you that while I, the Provost, and others in the administration will continue to work closely with the faculty, reality dictates that we must do so primarily through your elected representatives. That said, as many of you can attest, my door is always open to individual faculty members.

Our diversity efforts will require continuing attention, effort and resources. The successes we have enjoyed will demand continuing commitment. But there is more to our commitment to diversity than recruitment of new students and faculty of various races and ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds, religious beliefs and geography. "The hallmark of this campus is its welcoming, friendly environment," a phenomenon witnessed just this week by victims of Hurricane Katrina — whether evacuee sheltered and cared for in Reed Arena or displaced student welcomed into the Aggie family. This is one of the most important Aggie traditions. It makes us different than virtually all other large universities. That welcoming and friendly environment makes a gigantic university into a family, the Aggie family, where we respect each other, look out for each other, bond together for the rest of our lives.

Still, there seem to be a tiny number among us who do not accept the idea of an Aggie family. Among the overwhelming majority of welcoming Aggies, there are apparently an immature or ignorant few in our larger community who would exclude and insult some members of the Aggie family or visitors to our campus. Their behavior belies all we believe not just about the Aggie family, but the importance of character, integrity, and ethics here at Texas A&M. "We must have zero tolerance for incivility on our campus;" those who insult a few Aggies because they are different in some way from the majority insult all Aggies. Even one such person is one too many. Their offensive behavior must be opposed and we must educate them to accept and practice Aggie values.

Our drive for excellence is recognized nation-wide. While individual rankings are always suspect, when multiple such rankings all suggest a common trend, attention must be paid. According to US News and World Report, in the last two years we have advanced from 27th among public universities to 21st. The magazine now ranks us fifth nationally in terms of “best values” among American universities. Our engineering program is ranked 8th among public universities. According to Forbes magazine, our business program is ranked in the top ten nationally among public universities. In a new ranking, The Washington Monthly magazine ranks us 7th in the nation in terms of contribution to the country, based on enrollment of students from lower income families, students who enter public service and the military, places where research advances economic development and competitiveness, and more. In short, in every arena, Texas A&M is drawing attention and respect for our efforts to take every aspect of campus life to a new level of excellence. "If universities can be said to be a brand — and
like it or not they are, then ours is a unique combination of world class academics with time-tested values, tradition and spirit. A unique combination of the brain and the heart."

In sum, it’s been another year of dramatic change — and, I believe, improvement — in every area at Texas A&M as all parts of the University drive toward a higher level of excellence. As some of you know, my role in this process at A&M nearly ended early in the year with a call from Washington, D.C. On January 6, 2005, Andy Card, President Bush’s Chief of Staff (and an old friend), called to see if I would be willing to become the Director of National Intelligence — the "intelligence czar" created by Congress in 2004. I told him that I did not want to leave A&M and did not want to return to Washington. Still, I felt duty-bound to give the request serious consideration. For the next 17 days, including several hours at the White House on the Monday before Inauguration Day, I wrestled with this decision. On Sunday, January 23rd, I decided that if I might be able to help make America safer in a dangerous time, then I must, and therefore had to accept the position — and leave A&M.

That evening, I wrote out what I would say at the traditional introductory press conference in Washington with the President. A press conference I expected would take place within a few days. I also wrote an e-mail to all Aggies explaining my decision, to be issued in College Station at the same time the press conference began. The last sentence of that e-mail read: "For now, though, I only wanted you to know that this appointment was due to no initiative of mine, that the decision was wrenching, and that I can hardly bear the idea of leaving Aggieland."

I then went for a late night walk around campus. Through the Quad, by the Evans Library, past Sbisa and around the Northside dorms, back by the YMCA building, and finally to Academic Plaza and the statue of Sul Ross. I sat down on a bench there, as thoughts raced through my mind of Ross and Rudder, of Silver Taps and Muster, of the Corps, of the incredible students and faculty and staff here, and of all that is underway to make A&M greater. I realized, sitting there alone in the dark, brushing away tears, how much I had come to love Texas A&M, all it stands for, and all it can become. And I knew at that moment I could not leave.

I called Andy Card at Camp David at 8:00 the next morning, and told him I had to tell the President no.

I have not regretted that decision. Washington, D.C. is my past; Texas A&M is my present and my future (at least for a while). There is no position or opportunity for me now more significant than President of Texas A&M University. And none I would trade it for.

And so, we greet this new academic year with renewed determination and energy to move to an even higher level of excellence for Texas A&M — a unique American institution. Hold on to your hats, and enjoy the ride. Nothing similar to it is likely to occur again in your career. Thank you.