2010 Academic Convocation

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Howdy! For our guests visiting today, welcome to Aggieland!

Let me begin by first thanking Chairman Foster, the other members of the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents, and Chancellor Michael McKinney for the trust that you have demonstrated in me and for the great honor you have given me by naming me the 24th president of Texas A&M University. I accept this appointment humbly, as only the fifth Aggie to hold this office.

Sitting among you today is my wife of almost 38 years, Karin Loftin; my two children and their spouses, and my three grandchildren. I thank my wife for her tolerance and long suffering and my entire family for their support of and belief in me.

This is my opportunity to not only provide a “state of the university” message to our Aggie Family but to also look beyond this moment and provide a glimpse, though my eyes, of what the future holds for this great university . . . this “unique American institution.”

For those of us in academia, the challenge is clear: “Never has the product of education been in higher demand. Never have the role and scope of education been subjected to a more detailed analysis. And never has the totality of the modus operandi of education been placed under a heavier mandate for improvement.” Certainly these words characterize the state of education today, but these words are not mine; they were spoken by Jack K. Williams on the occasion of his investiture as the seventeenth President of Texas A&M on April 16, 1971.

I am also reminded of what Dr. David Chapman, the long-time archivist at Texas A&M, tells our new faculty. He recounts the extraordinary challenges of the early days of the A&M College of Texas, when fires, mud and wild animals were constant threats from the natural world, and when disputes in the world of politics led to the firing of the entire faculty and the elimination of all funding for the college by the Texas Legislature. By citing these rather dramatic elements in our history I intend only to remind both you and me that we all too often focus only on the moment and do not always use the long lens of history to give perspective to our current circumstances.

In preparing for this day I reviewed the investiture speeches (at least those that have survived) of several previous presidents. Not surprisingly, all mentioned, often at great length, the Morrill Land Grant Act that made possible the establishment of Texas A&M. So as not to diverge from tradition, I, too, will take a few moments to trace the origins of Texas A&M University before I characterize the university of today and envision the university of tomorrow.
As an institution of higher education, Texas A&M is the product of a long and distinguished lineage. Only about 85 institutions that were in existence in the Western world prior to the year 1500 are still in existence today. Of these 85, about 70 are universities, and most of them are in Europe.

These early universities were, according to Marcia Colish, “associations of students and teachers with collective legal rights usually guaranteed by charters issued by princes, prelates, or the towns in which they were located.”[i]

The universities that were established across Europe became the progenitors of today’s modern university. Perhaps the best characterization of the ultimate manifestation of the historic university can be found in the writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman when he became rector of the new Catholic University of Dublin in 1854. In his seminal work, The Idea of a University, Newman championed the university as the seat of liberal education and railed against those who insisted that a university education be “useful” [Discourse 7, {153}].[iii]

At about this same time, Justin Smith Morrill introduced the Land-Grant College Act as a means to support the creation of colleges across the United States for the unprecedented purpose of blending elements of a practical education with elements of a classical education, along with military training. These new institutions were intended to be, in the words of William Belmont Parker—a biographer of Morrill’s—“accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil, where all of needful science for the practical avocations of life shall be taught.”[iii] For the first time, a broad cross-section of the population could aspire to a college education. For the first time, college students could take courses in surveying, geology and machinery design along with courses in moral philosophy, Latin and rhetoric. And for the first time, a college degree ensured that graduates were prepared to go forth and earn a living.

In some ways, this was a revolutionary departure from Cardinal Newman’s notion of the academy, but in other ways, it was not. Each in its own way fulfills the very purpose of a university—what Cardinal Newman called the teaching of “universal knowledge.” The beauty of the land-grant concept is that this knowledge is blended with “practical knowledge” and equips students to effectively benefit society.

Finally, in the 20th century, we saw the development, especially during and immediately after World War II, of the modern research university. These universities have played and continue to play a central role in advancing the economic development and national security of the United States.

With this backdrop I now want to attempt to capture the essence of Texas A&M University and its branch campuses in Galveston and Qatar and characterize the university’s unique position among American institutions of higher education.

**First and foremost, education—teaching.**

On the 4th of October in 1876, Governor Richard Coke, in inaugurating the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, stated that “…these halls are dedicated to the cause of liberal, scientific and practical education.” The same is true today, on this 24th of September, 2010. Some have argued that
we have abandoned or de-emphasized our commitment to undergraduate education. I would counter by asserting that undergraduate education at Texas A&M has never been stronger. Consider our size alone: this university has the largest undergraduate student population in the State of Texas and the fourth largest in the entire country. Also consider our reputation among critical stakeholders. For just one recent example, I would invite you to read the September 13th edition of the Wall Street Journal. In this issue the Journal reported on a recent survey it conducted of almost 500 of the country’s largest corporations. They found that corporate recruiters ranked Texas A&M University second in the nation on the basis of whose graduates were most academically well-rounded, best prepared to enter the workforce and most likely to succeed in the workforce. Finally, if you are not persuaded by these two items, I would urge you to follow one of our faculty members for a day or drop into one of their classes and see the passion, the knowledge and the dedication that they bring to their teaching. You will find, as I already know, that education remains our central mission.

Enhancing the well-being of the citizens of Texas, our nation and the world—a research powerhouse

As measured by research expenditures—a gauge of productivity—Texas A&M ranks third in the nation among all public and private institutions without a medical school. Spurred by our land-grant, sea-grant and space-grant missions, Texas A&M is now one of the most successful research universities in the world. Our research, intimately interwoven with the work of our A&M System Partners—agencies such as the Texas Engineering Experiment Station, the Texas Transportation Institute, Texas AgriLife Research and the Texas A&M Health Science Center—is not simply an interesting academic exercise, it is revolutionary. It literally changes the world. Examples abound at Texas A&M, at Texas A&M University at Galveston, and at Texas A&M University at Qatar.

On the main campus, examples include the work of the late Texas A&M Professor Norman Borlaug, who saved the lives of over a billion people around the world through the drought and disease resistant crops he developed . . . the work of Texas A&M Professor Kim-Vy Tran, who leads the international team that has discovered one of the universe’s most distant cluster of galaxies . . . and the work of Texas A&M Professor Michael Waters and his team at the Center for the Study of the First Americans, who revolutionized the field of anthropology when they found that people came to this continent much earlier than any had previously thought.

At our Galveston campus, Professor Tom Iliffe has, for many years, led team of undergraduate and graduate students into the ocean to discover dozens—literally dozens—of new species of marine life. National Geographic magazine recently did a cover story on Tom’s exciting discoveries.

Our land-grant heritage of implementing the practical results of research is not only profoundly beneficial to people everywhere, but it also sparks economic development that creates jobs and improves the welfare of all Texans. The research that we do makes our state a magnet that attracts educated, bright and hard-working people from throughout the nation and the world. And this has a direct impact on the undergraduate education our students receive. Don’t forget that the faculty who conduct leading edge research bring this new knowledge to the classroom in a matter of weeks or months, far faster than the time it takes for textbooks to be updated. And do not forget that many of our professors also involve undergraduates in their research. Just one example could be found at our
Freshman Convocation held earlier this month. The speaker was one of our exceptional faculty members who routinely involves undergraduates in her work, Dr. Deborah Thomas. At Freshman Convocation, she described her discoveries about the earth’s climate history that she and her students made by studying the sediment in our oceans. This is just one example of the qualities that make Texas A&M special—and I would argue, unique.

I believe that “the future well-being of our nation, even its survival, is closely related to our success in developing new and more efficient techniques of production and distribution and in more efficient utilization of all resources, human and physical. This, in turn, requires ever expanding and deeper research into the secrets of nature to unlock and use them for the benefit of our society and all mankind . . . .” These are the words of Major General Earl Rudder spoken during his installation as the sixteenth President of Texas A&M on March 26, 1960. I could not say it any better today.

**Keeping the Spirit—our core values and traditions**

When I enrolled at Texas A&M as a fish in 1967 the campus was in the midst of a revolutionary change. Just a few years before I arrived, our Board made fundamental decisions that set the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas on a dramatic new course toward university status. Their decision to allow the unrestricted enrollment of women and to make participation in our Corps of Cadets optional enabled Texas A&M to rapidly evolve from an all-male, military-focused, regional institution into the modern research university that it has now become. Many, and I am sure some of them are here today, were certain that this decision would destroy the A&M that they loved. They were certain that treasured traditions would be lost and that the essential core values that guided the university would, at best, be weakened, if not discarded altogether. As one who has the privilege of interacting daily with our students, including members of our Corps of Cadets, I can firmly state that the people who held these opinions were wrong! What magic has allowed this university to not only maintain its legendary traditions, but to even strengthen and extend them? What providence has allowed us to quintuple in size since I was a freshman, yet keep the Aggie Spirit burning bright? That magic and that providence are real. I see them every single day in our students, nearly 50,000 strong. A university president or a body of former students—no matter how passionate—cannot keep Texas A&M focused on the core values of excellence, integrity, loyalty, leadership, respect, and selfless service. Instead, this focus is achieved through the experiences we can provide to our students while they are here—their interactions with their peers, faculty, staff and former students in our classrooms and laboratories and beyond. Students come here from all over the world, they experience Fish Camp, they join the Corps of Cadets, they work on MSC committees, they become involved in one of over 800 student organizations—or start a new one—and through their interactions they are transformed into leaders of character, just as I was transformed and many of you were transformed here in Aggieland.

**What are we?—the Aggies are we!**

Like many of my predecessors, I believe that Texas A&M is unique among institutions of higher education. But what makes this the case? We all know that there are many fine colleges and universities here in Texas and elsewhere that offer a first-class education to their students. We know that there are some universities that are home to creative scholars whose research has had a profound
influence on our daily lives. We also know that there are some institutions that are steeped in tradition and that instill in their students principles and values that are on par with those embraced by Aggies.

However, I challenge you to find another university that can make the case that it accomplishes all three of these missions to the degree that Texas A&M does. I—and you—can name many that do one or even two, but I ask you think of any that do all three! No, Texas A&M is truly special—truly unique.

**State of the University and Future Direction**

Now let us look at where we are today and where we are headed. Over a decade ago we began our journey toward Vision 2020—Creating a Culture of Excellence. This has guided our decisions and has led to many significant improvements in our undergraduate and graduate programs, a major reinvestment in our faculty, increased emphasis on diversity in its many dimensions, and a major building initiative to better accommodate our growing faculty and student body.

We have accomplished a great deal. In fact, we have made more gains than some people thought possible. We are on the right track, but the road ahead is a difficult one.

The economic challenges that Texas A&M is facing today are greater than any we have faced since the Great Depression. We have spent the past few months turning inward to find ways to meet these external challenges. We have made some difficult choices. But because of this, we have become even better stewards of the resources that our fellow citizens have entrusted to us. Today, Texas A&M is leaner and more efficient than ever before.

Given our tremendous achievements of the past decade, and the economic challenges that we are now facing, many people have recommended to me that we pause to “catch our breath.” That we consider these accomplishments “good enough” for now. To them, I say: We cannot afford to pause or to declare that what we have achieved is sufficient. We cannot afford to lose our momentum, even in these difficult times.

Sustaining our momentum as a leaner and more efficient university means that we must carefully and strategically reassess our priorities for the years remaining until 2020. We must be absolutely certain that we are using our limited resources in the best possible way as we move ahead. The entire campus community—faculty, staff and students—has been involved in this open and inclusive process for the past few months. As we begin preparing our budget for the next fiscal year, we will use the results of a vast network of inputs from Vision 2020, the Academic Master Plan, recent task force reports, the five-year plans of our colleges and divisions, and the input from our students, faculty and staff to identify our priorities.

A key to continuing along the trajectory that we embarked on when Vision 2020 was adopted in 1999 will be to boost its relevance eleven years later. To that end I will appoint and lead a team of faculty, students, staff, and former students to examine the basic premises of Vision 2020—making any necessary adjustments for the changes that have occurred over the last decade. These efforts will require a great deal of time and effort by a many associated with Texas A&M, but they are absolutely necessary if we are to stay true to the concepts of collegiality and shared governance.
When this process comes to an end—when all of these voices have been heard—we will make the tough decisions that will best advance the interests of the university. By April of 2011 we will be able to recommit ourselves to the great vision, to embrace it with the same passion, hope and sense of destiny that we all felt upon its original adoption. We can hold before ourselves a vibrant and vivid image of what we will become by the year 2020. So equipped we can then link arms and march together into a future that will place Texas A&M University at the pinnacle of public institutions.

**Conclusion**

You may ask, in this time of budget reductions, anxiety, and fear that we are losing our way, how can we do this?

Like those who came before us at Texas A&M, we will draw upon our intrinsic strengths to reinvent ourselves. As I noted earlier in this address, Texas A&M has triumphed over difficult challenges in the past. I know that we will do so again. I am confident that we will not only survive our present difficulties but that we will emerge stronger than ever as we sustain our noble land-grant mission of teaching, research and service—as we fulfill the promise of Vision 2020.

Why do I place my confidence in Texas A&M? I do so because of the strength and commitment of our faculty—and our extraordinary staff—and in our students, both current and former. Our faculty are dedicated teachers, scholars and mentors. They help develop leaders of character not only by what they do in their classrooms and laboratories, but also in offices, hallways, and even in their own homes. They conduct the research that deepens and broadens the education our students receive and brings distinction to our university.

I am confident in Texas A&M because of the strength and commitment of our A&M System partners—among them the Texas Engineering Experiment Station, the Texas Transportation Institute, AgriLife Research and the Texas A&M Health Science Center. We have worked hand-in-hand with these research partners to improve the lives of people in Texas and beyond.

And finally, I am confident in Texas A&M because of that magic—that providence—that continues to infuse our university. We have not forgotten our history and traditions—we have embraced them even more fully. We cherish our Corps of Cadets—the Keepers of the Spirit—and will continue to strengthen and support it. We are nurtured by the great Aggie Network, consisting of more than 350,000 former students, that reaches around the globe. The Aggie Spirit continues to burn bright.

Texas Aggies have been changing the world for nearly 135 years. Today, we are on the right path toward even greater achievements: being recognized as one of the best public universities in the nation—and the world. Let us consider how profoundly this would benefit our state and nation, and the countless generations of Aggies who will follow us. Let us continue to move together toward 2020 with the certainty that we have indeed created a culture of excellence.

We face challenges from all sides, we face obstacles at every turn, we face those who doubt our resolve and question our purpose. But I am convinced—I do not doubt—that the opportunity for ultimate greatness is ours to seize, and that those who would suggest otherwise do not understand
that it is our time. Our time to define what comprises the very best undergraduate education. Our time to elevate our faculty to the apex of research, scholarship and creative endeavors. Our time to be recognized as the exemplar of graduate education. Our time to make the campuses of Texas A&M University places that both inspire and support our faculty and students.

It is time for Texas A&M University, an institution characterized by its devoted faculty, its magnificent traditions and the indomitable spirit of its students, to finish a journey that is truly remarkable in the history of American universities. From its land grant roots in 1876, through its storied military heritage, to the institution that literally exploded onto the academic scene in the second half of the 20th century as one of the largest educational and research institutions in the country, Texas A&M has come to the end of the first decade of the 21st century poised to become one of the very best academic institutions in the United States, public or private.

It is time for me today to not only officially accept the mantle of leadership of Texas A&M University, but to also commit to all of you that I will do my utmost to lead us along the path of academic and institutional excellence that you have worked so hard to chart—to commit to you that I will protect and support the fundamental mission of teaching, research and engagement that is at the heart of the unique American institution that is Texas A&M today. It is time for Texas A&M!

My friends, it is an extraordinary privilege to be the President of Texas A&M University.


[iii] William Belmont Parker, *The Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill*