"... And Perhaps Cornell"

Inaugural Address
Frank Rhodes
Ninth President, Cornell University
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Mr. Chairman, President Fleming, Dr. Heyns, Members of the Board of Trustees and of the University Council, Honored Delegates from Other Universities and Colleges, Fellow Faculty, Staff, Students, Alumni, and Friends of Cornell:

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and you, Dr. Fleming, for your kind remarks. I accept the trust and the charge that you, Mr. Chairman, and the Board of Trustees have given to me, and I do so with a sense of gratitude, a sense of humility, and a sense of hopefulness.

I accept it with a sense of gratitude to you and all other Cornellians—faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends—whose devotion has made this great institution what it is. I want especially to pay tribute to you, Mr. Chairman, to Mr. Arthur Dean, former chairman of the Board of Trustees, and to my three immediate predecessors, Presidents Malott, Perkins, and Corson—all of whom are here today—for the steadfast support and devoted service you have provided over the years.

I accept your charge also with humility, because so much is expected, so much trust is given. No one can contemplate this responsibility without a sense of personal inadequacy. I have much to learn. I shall have much need of help, encouragement, and forbearance from all of you assembled here today. I shall certainly make mistakes, and we shall certainly differ at times, not, I think, over ends but over means. I can promise no certain success and no simple solutions. For hard times lie ahead for all of higher education. And hard choices lie ahead for Cornell. What I can promise is my abso-

lute commitment to the overall welfare of Cornell and to the well-being of its several parts. With your support we shall confront the hard choices together, with forethought, deliberation, and resolution.

But I also accept your charge with hopefulness. Cornell is a strong and vigorous institution: strong in its past achievements, strong in the range of its present enterprise, and strong in the promise that it holds for our future.

I find strength in the context in which Cornell was founded. This university came into existence in an era of turmoil and in a context of both political and academic opposition. In spite of the century that separates us from our founding, the problems and the hopes of the 1860s were not very different from those of today. Our founder and our first president embraced both the problems and the hopes of their age with equal energy. It is their steadfastness and courage that we inherit and celebrate today.

But if we may derive confidence from the past, we may also derive confidence from the present, for the range of teaching and research programs that Cornell supports is as remarkable in its breadth as it is outstanding in its quality. The professional distinction and personal dedication of the faculty who support these programs in every area of human inquiry, need, and endeavor is matched by the quality and commitment of our students and our staff.

I find the present hopeful, too, in the range of partnerships Cornell enjoys. For we are a partner with all the people of this Empire State, touching their aspirations and meeting their needs as we serve them through our role as the land-grant university. We are a partner with our sister institutions in the Ivy League, sharing the high standards and sturdy independence that have made this group a model for others. We are a partner with a host of loyal alumni, supporters, friends, and foundations, who understand the essential need to preserve the freedom of independent higher education in times that threaten the diversity and excellence of our

leading institutions of learning. We are partners, too, with a larger company that spans the oceans and links the centuries. This is the company of faithful men and women who have loved learning, and defended it well. The presence of honored delegates here today from other universities and colleges, ancient and modern, from this country and other countries, symbolizes and reinforces this enduring and encompassing partnership.

What can a university president contribute to an institution in these times of stability and even retrenchment? He or she must, of course, guarantee that the institution is effectively and efficiently managed, not only at the central level, but at the school, college, department, and unit level. He or she must be a partner with all those who together form the university's constituency. He or she must be an advocate and a spokesperson for the university, both within and without the campus, reminding it of its high calling, encouraging, enabling, challenging, explaining, and sometimes defending it in its wider mission. For the president is one of the few individuals in the university community whose responsibility is to the whole institution, rather than to one of its particular parts. But above all, the president of any institution is a servant, and Cornell will prosper to the extent that I am effective in serving those of you who are Cornell. I distinguish here between being a servant of the whole University and being the slave of any particular constituency. That balance will not be easy. I sometimes feel that the president's task is much like that of the lord chief justice of England, who recently said that the greater part of his judicial time was spent investigating collisions between propelled vehicles, each on its own side of the road, each sounding its horn, and each stationary.

But the role of a university president who wishes to serve faithfully and effectively must be more than that of one who preserves the intricate complexities of the status quo, comfortable though that role would be. We must all have hopes for our university, for without vision, the people perish.

Years ago Morris Bishop, beloved not only by his

own generation but also by subsequent generations of Cornellians, responded to a critical review of American higher education by a foreign author. The author had claimed that only a few American institutions were places of any great distinction. The only "typical American colleges," the author concluded, were "Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and perhaps Cornell."

"Perhaps Cornell!" Bishop thundered. "It has always been the fate of our University to be Perhaps Cornell! A part neither of the aristocratic tradition of the original colonies nor the educational democracy of the great West, . . . stoutly liberal and strangely conservative. . . . Had he sought pure examples of the great popular American university, a part of the body politic, agent and function of the people, enlightener of the everyday life for many leagues around its walls, he would have mentioned Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio State, and California. And perhaps Cornell.

"Should we complain because our Alma Mater has found no fixed and sure classification in the educational world? Why no, I should think not. . . . Perhaps it is important that we should not be grouped as a member of any Big Four, or Big Twelve. It may be that foreign observers hunting the essentially American college will specify Cornell University. And perhaps Harvard, Yale, and Princeton."

One does not have to deny our kinship and the strength of Cornell's bonds with Harvard, Yale, and Princeton—bonds we cherish and seek to strengthen—to respond to the force of Bishop's claim of the distinctive role and character of Cornell. Yet I wonder if those words haunt you as they haunt me. Perhaps Cornell. Perhaps Cornell. And they haunt me not as an uninformed and pompous judgment of our past but as a challenge and a hope for our future.

What kind of role, what distinctive character, may we hope for for Cornell in the years that lie ahead? I have great hopes for Cornell. Our university was established upon certain basic principles. Its early history was influenced by certain basic commit-

ments. It has prospered in its steady pursuit of certain basic goals. These principles, commitments, and goals we must reaffirm. Let me share with you the four great reaffirmations that I believe we need to make. We must reaffirm, first, the power of reason; second, the strength of community; third, the priority of research; and, fourth, the wider partnership of Cornell. For it is these that represent the essential mission of our university.

The first reaffirmation is that the University is a realm of reason and that humankind's best hope in the uncertain years that lie ahead is the recognition of the power and priority of reason. The formidable problems that face our society have led Robert Heilbroner to describe the future as less malleable, less predictable, and less benign than we had once supposed. And yet, as he remarks, the future is neither prison nor chaos, and our success in it will depend in large measure on the extent to which we identify the choices available to us and make intelligent decisions concerning those we pursue.

That analysis of our problems and the selection of the optimum decisions will involve knowledge of the most comprehensive and sophisticated kind. Such knowledge is gained not by casual acquaintance but by intellectual discipline, rigor, precision, and commitment on the part of those who would pursue it.

There is in this a standard, for our own perceptions and performance are matched and tested against those of both our peers and our predecessors. It is against the accumulated wisdom of the ages that we judge ourselves, for only so may we learn the vast distance that separates the best from the second best. And it is by the best—not the worthy second best—that human ignorance, suffering, and need are confronted and overcome. I like the story of the preparations for Winston Churchill's visit to the Plaza Hotel in New York City. An embassy official, responding to an anxious manager, assured him, "Mr. Churchill's tastes are very simple. He is easily pleased with the best of everything." We shall serve both our students and our society best as we continue to insist on the best of

everything. Only if we set the highest standard for our students now will they set the highest standard for themselves in later years.

But knowledge, though powerful, has its limitations. Analytical and critical skills abound, but they have led to reductionism. Even as we seek a wider scholarly synthesis, the wholeness of things escapes us, and the fullness of life eludes us. For the end of reason is not to be seen as participation in some cosmic academic chess match, or some Hessian glass bead game, though some will view it as that. Its nobler end is to promote the larger art of life. Perhaps Cornell can show that specialization should be complementary to, not competitive with, this larger synthesis. Perhaps Cornell can reestablish the link between learning and life.

The second reaffirmation we need to make is that learning best takes place and individual growth flourishes not in isolation but in community. The university is a unique community; it is a community of splendid diversity of origins, commitment, expertise, and hopes. We must nourish and increase that diversity through our affirmative action programs. Yet, for all our diversity, there is a single cord that binds us together: our shared commitment to the search for understanding. A university degree is not just evidence of four years' study in the quietness of a library, but rather evidence of the give-and-take, question-and-debate, of four years in the community of diversity. That experience—rightly embraced—transforms and enriches.

But membership in this realm of reason also demands the right of all individuals to declare their views and the freedom of debate for all members to examine them. We have witnessed, in recent years, a lack of tolerance for the exposition of unorthodox views. And yet, unless we believe that our present knowledge is infallible and that our present society is incapable of further improvement, freedom for the presentation of any views and freedom for the orderly expression of counterviews, however unpopular either may be, are essential to the survival of the realm of reason.

So we affirm that truth is reached in community,

against a background of diversity and pluralism. And this is a community where a difference of opinion represents, in Whitehead's words, "not a catastrophe, but an opportunity." This is a community in which we live and grow together, not in spite of, but because of, doubt and debate, challenge and response—supported by a mutual tolerance, trust, and respect. For without such tolerance and trust, our members will be known for their blindness rather than their vision.

This community imposes another demand on its members. We have long championed the claim that learning leads to freedom of mind, largeness of spirit, and nobility of purpose; yet bondage, narrowness, and ignobility are everywhere in our academic midst. Our campus communities belie the lofty rhetoric of our college catalogs. For as the range of our expertise and the number of our programs have expanded, our discourse has diminished, and with it that larger comprehension that comes from an understanding of the relatedness of all things.

The challenge before us is to demonstrate in our community that learning leads not merely to cleverness, and the narrowness of mind and smallness of heart that sometimes accompany it, but rather to enhanced sensitivity, expanded horizons, enlarged humanity: to magnanimity and not to myopia. Competence and compassion, learning and life, can an institution exist to inspire its members freely to embrace them together? For knowledge guarantees neither greatness nor goodness. What it does provide is a basis for both, a basis by which each person can identify the great and the good and commit themselves to them. Yet commitment may be unworthy, as well as worthy. It will lead to human enhancement only as long as it is informed by knowledge and moderated by love.

Can we inspire and endow our students not only with high technical competence and consummate professional skill but also with that particular discernment that will encourage them to commit those skills to the common good? I am not optimistic that this can be done, though it is not impossi-

ble. It will require patience and unusual understanding. Perhaps Cornell has the capacity to support this restoration of collegiality. Perhaps Cornell can demonstrate the way.

There is a third reaffirmation; we need to reaffirm the priority of our search for the new understanding, new knowledge, and more comprehensive explanation that undergird every aspect of our discovery, invention, and creativity and form the basis of our present and future knowledge. For a university is more than the custodian of the knowledge of the past; it is also the creator of and contributor to the knowledge of the future. We represent a questioning species. We need to know, to understand, to seek, to explain, to relate, to reinterpret, to reduce the chaos we encounter around us to order.

There are in this nation about twenty universities—two-thirds of them independent—whose research capacity is of such breadth and distinction that they form a national asset. Cornell is one of these. Our obligation is not only to teaching; it is also to learning, for each teacher is also a student. The range and quality of research in our university spans the cosmos. It ranges from the study of galaxies almost inconceivably distant, and almost immeasurably large, to the study of nuclear particles, almost inconceivably small.

Cornell excels in both, operating the world's largest radar-radio telescope and the world's highest-energy electron synchrotron. In every area of human need and endeavor, Cornell faculty members are involved: from the design of planetary probes to Jupiter and Mars and the discovery of the rings of Uranus to the study of agricultural economics in Tompkins County; from the study of nuclear fusion as a potential source of energy to the analysis of effective management techniques and labor relations; from the study of infant psychology to the development of more effective treatment for burns; from the definitive edition of the papers of Lafayette to the writing of a best-selling novel; from the study of an archaeological site in Turkey to the architectural design and staffing of a huge hotel

complex in West Germany; from experimental work in recombinant DNA to the study of nitrogen fixation in rice paddies of Asia; from the study of bird migration to the development of new submicron techniques that are basic to computer technology.

Not all these studies are useful, though many are. Not all will yield short-term benefits, though some will. Not all will have a major effect on contemporary culture, though a few may. But they have a wider kinship than utility, applicability, and popularity. They are part of the range of seeking, learning, creating, and questioning that is the glory and the burden of our common humanity. For know we must. Create we must. We cannot tolerate the chaos of our disordered environment without an attempt to impose coherence upon the apparent discreteness of its components, and relationship and pattern upon its superficial randomness. Poetry and physics, sculpture and surgery, music and management, language and logic, architecture and astronomy, for all their differences, are alike in being reflections of our defiance of the disorder, imperfection, and incomprehensibility of both our cosmic home and our personal experience. And this necessity to know is the engine that drives what human progress we have achieved; it is both the enabler and the expression of our highest aspirations.

That is why the major research universities are a national asset, whose well-being is of paramount importance to the nation's welfare, security, prosperity, and health. The research university is the great reservoir on which the fulfillment of all our hopes and larger social aspirations must draw. Knowledge is the base of the pyramid of progress. For all our problems—both local and global—are represented within the subjects that engage faculty members across the spectrum of Cornell's schools and colleges. In confronting the towering technical and social challenges that these problems represent, there lies what hope of survival we have for the future. And in addressing the encompassing personal questions of truth, meaning, justice,

beauty, goodness, and hope, there lies the heart of those yearnings we have for survival with meaning and dignity.

The research university is humankind's best hope against the stark alternatives of the future. How ironic, then, that federal support for basic research has so languished in the last ten years. How tragic that research itself has of late become a target of political derision. How paradoxical that the growing demands on our universities for what is euphemistically called accountability are in danger of destroying the diversity, which is their strength. Perhaps Cornell, with its remarkable breadth of research activity, can contribute to a restoration of public understanding of the priority of research.

There is one more reaffirmation that we must make: Cornell exists to serve a wider community than that of the campus. When our university was founded, in 1865, it was designated the land-grant institution of the state of New York. The Morrill Land Grant Act, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, established universities "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes. . . ." So Cornell was established to be, in our founder's words, an institution "for mastering all the practical questions of life with success and honor"; a place where "any person can find instruction in any study." The University has remained faithful to that dream. Unlike almost all its peer institutions, it has, for more than a century, devoted itself to the extension and multiplication of its teaching and research throughout the state. In factories, farms, schools, hospitals, community centers, prisons, and homes in every area of the state—both urban and rural—Cornell fulfills this "broader mission." The state is now our campus. Indeed, our campus extends far beyond the state. Adlai E. Stevenson once declared, "I have heard it said that Cornell and White were the first to proclaim what we all now believe—that everyone should be educated to the limits of his ability. Cornell is still dedicated to serving its community, to education for life, and to encouraging human development in its richest diversity. But the dimen-

sion and the scale have now changed. Cornell's community is now the world."

This is a sobering realization, for it suggests that Cornell has a still wider mission: a mission to pledge itself in its teaching and research in service to all men and women. For the problems of hunger, energy, population, pollution, resources, and poverty are problems that are worldwide in scope and urgent in nature. And they are also problems with which there is as yet no apparent attempt to deal on anything but the local level. Cornell has an astonishing capacity in every area. Its work in medicine, in nursing, in agriculture, in veterinary medicine, in international studies, in engineering, in the sciences, in the arts, in the humanities, in the social sciences, in law, in architecture, in business, in the hospitality industry, in industrial relations, and in human ecology—all these might form a basis for a new partnership across not only disciplinary and professional boundaries but organizational and national boundaries, to link knowledge to its humane application.

Is it not possible that some of our universities can so cooperate in such wider service that their commitment will become a catalyst to others, to foundations, to other universities, to government, to industry? Perhaps encouraging others that solutions are possible on a limited but cumulative scale, that informed effort, sustained research, devoted teaching, and public service will make a difference. Perhaps this might represent the beginning of a new hope for humankind that would replace the despair of the age in which we live. That is a vision of almost alarming proportions. It is a hope that is almost arrogant in its dimensions; yet, immense as the problems are, it is not an idle dream. It is not an idle dream if our universities will blaze the way, providing a renewal of spirit by the coordination of at least some of our now-fragmented efforts.

May we hold such hopes as these? We not only may; we must. It was Morris Bishop who declared, "No great achievement takes place without great hopes. Giant towers rest on a foundation of visionary purposes." No institution can save the world,

and no institution can be a social service station for all humankind. But some of our great institutions, acting together on common global problems, could provide a beacon of hope: hope in the power of knowledge to free and enable men and women, hope in the power of community, hope in the effectiveness of creative research in every area of human need and endeavor, hope in the possibility of a new partnership that would expand the humane application of knowledge to our global problems. Perhaps Cornell can lead the way.

So this is a time for renewal. It is a time of hope. It is a time of new commitment. It is because I share those hopes, believing in these great ends, believing in the possibility of their pursuit, believing that Cornell has a future destiny far greater even than her great past, that I gladly accept the charge that you have given to me, and I pledge myself to serve you with all my heart and with all my strength.

The address ". . . And Perhaps Cornell" was given by Frank Rhodes at the convocation for his investiture as Cornell's ninth president, November 10, 1977, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.