

Acceptance of Cornell Presidency

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Before I share a few words of my own, I would like to recognize some friends and family members who are here to share today with me.

First I would like to acknowledge my parents, Leonard and Imogene Lehman, who flew up this morning from North Potomac, Maryland. You know, people sometimes ask me why I went to Cornell. And they are suspicious. They know that my mother graduated from Wellesley, and I couldn't go there. And they know that my father is a 1949 Cornell graduate and they assume that he pressured me to come to Cornell.

And I want to put that notion to rest. My father never once even hinted that I should follow him to Cornell.

Well ... I suppose, maybe, there might have been some subtle, subliminal hints.

I remember a moment in kindergarten when some of my fellow kindergarteners revealed to me that some lullabies do not begin, "Far above Cayuga's Waters,"

And in retrospect I think there might have been a reason why my father took such delight in pointing out to me that human blood cells are not brown. (Think about it.)

Anyway, I came of my own volition, just as my parents came up this morning of their own volition, and I am so very happy to see them here.

Next I would like to acknowledge my son Jacob. Jacob just flew in from Townhouse E on North Campus. He has mastered the intricacies of Cornell much, much faster than I did in my day, and I am so very proud of him and so very grateful that he is able to be here today.

Next I would like to acknowledge my fiancée, Kathy Okun, and her daughters, Monica and Julia. Kathy is a woman of extraordinary wisdom and talent and she has been exceptionally supportive of my dream to return to Cornell.

And last but not least I would like to introduce my dear friend Elliott Millenson, who roomed with me during my senior year at Cornell. Elliott has known me for 35 years, and he has agreed to keep silent about my past.

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So now I'd like to ask you all to join me and go back in time to Ithaca in the month of May 1977. The snow was starting to melt. I was finishing up my senior year at Cornell. I was graduating, singing for the last time as an undergraduate the words, "Tell all the pikers on the Hill that I'll be back again."

Never in my wildest fantasies could I have thought that I would be coming back to the Hill twenty-six years later as Cornell's eleventh President.

Back in 1977 I was leaving Ithaca to move west. To Ann Arbor, Michigan. To begin law school. And at that same moment Dale Corson was completing eight years of service as Cornell's eighth President. President Corson had led the University through some exceptionally challenging times and brought it back to stability. And I just want to say how meaningful it is to me that President Corson, the man I will always think of as my President of Cornell, is here with us today.

While I was on the road west from Ithaca to Ann Arbor, I passed a man heading east from Ann Arbor to Ithaca. Frank Rhodes was leaving the University of Michigan to take up the reins from Dale and to become Cornell's ninth president. Frank is 6'6" tall. He is taller than Dale, and as his successor that is, of course, right and proper.

All of us who love Cornell are indebted to Frank for his astonishing eighteen-year presidency, in which the University was transformed and renewed. And I am so very grateful that Frank and Rosa are here to celebrate with me today.

Frank was not, by the way, the first Cornell president to come from Michigan. In fact, he was the fourth. Andrew Dickson White, Charles Kendall Adams, and Edmund Ezra Day had all taught in Ann Arbor before coming to Ithaca. The ties between the two universities that I love are deep indeed.

Frank was, of course, succeeded by our tenth president, Hunter Rawlings. Hunter stands 6'7" tall. He is taller than Frank, and as his successor that is, of course, right and proper. During his tenure Cornell has been filled with fresh initiatives in Ithaca, in New York City, and in Doha, and we have seen a vitally important renewed commitment to the quality of undergraduate education. I met with Hunter on Wednesday for the first time, and I look forward to working closely with him through this transition. It is a privilege to be sitting with him and Elizabeth this afternoon.

Beginning next summer I will have the tremendous opportunity and humbling responsibility of serving as Cornell's eleventh President. And I have a terrible confession to make. In one sense it would be right and proper for me to be able to tell you that I am 6'8" tall. The problem is, it's not quite true.

I have thought about that problem a lot these past few days. And that has led me to think about Isaac Newton.

You see, in 1676, Newton wrote a famous letter to Robert Hooke. In that letter, while discussing new advances in the science of optics, Newton said, "If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

And here, today, we at Cornell stand on the shoulders of giants. 137 years of giants. Intellectual leaders – as professors, as presidents, as friends of Cornell – who have led this University to greatness.

It is our shared duty to them to stand on their shoulders and to see farther. And so I would ask you to join with me and try to see into our future. In thirteen short years we will be celebrating the 150th anniversary of our university's founding. Today we must begin to think about what 2015's sesquicentennial celebration will be like.

What will Cornell be? How will Cornell be contributing to the human condition? What should we aspire to?

Today Cornell is one of the handful of truly superb comprehensive research universities in the world. And among that handful, Cornell expresses a uniquely attractive combination of animating principles, principles that enable this university to make contributions that no other university in the world can make.

In 1865, the imaginations of Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White conceived a university of unsurpassed quality that could transcend the artificial boundaries that had, until then, constrained elite education in America. Their university would be nonsectarian. It would be open to women. It would be open to people of all races. And it would prepare students to contribute to society in meaningful ways. Students would be given primary responsibility for their own course of study. The ambition was to sustain human development in its richest diversity.

Through an historic partnership with the people of the State of New York and especially with the extraordinary community of Ithaca, Cornell University has tirelessly pursued that ambition. Hundreds of thousands of women and men of all races and religions and nationalities from every social class have come here and prepared themselves to serve human society. And the work of faculty luminaries from Ammons to Bethe have changed what it means to be human.

We owe it to our great forbears to ensure that in 2015 Cornell remains one of the handful of truly superb comprehensive research universities of the world. Transcending artificial boundaries. Illuminating the human condition.

What will that entail? It will require first and foremost the committed leadership of the faculty. The greatness of Cornell will always depend upon the initiative of professors who have ambition. The ambition to contribute great ideas. Whose field of vision extends far beyond East Hill. Far beyond Ithaca. Far beyond New York State. Whose curiosity drives them to fundamental insights about humanity and about the physical and natural world.

Where will those insights come over the course of the next fifteen years? Of course, we cannot know. But surely we can predict. We can be confident that many will come in the center of our oldest and best established intellectual disciplines – disciplines that were already mature when the first students arrived in 1868. And we can also be confident that many will come in fields of study that do not yet have names.

But let me speculate with you this afternoon about where many of those insights are likely to be found. I want to speculate in this way because it will help you to understand the way in which I, from the perspective of Ann Arbor, have come to perceive Cornell today. And I want to speculate in this way because I believe part of my role as President is to ask the questions that stimulate our faculty to provide wise answers.

More generally, I believe that Cornell's president must nourish a culture of aspiration. Aspiration to greatness. Aspiration to contribution. Everyone who is a part of Cornell should hunger to leave a legacy of enduring insight and achievement.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, our world desperately needs insights in every domain of inquiry. And let me just list a few of the many domains where I believe that Cornell has the potential to offer insights of true significance.

This morning, a faculty colleague asked whether such a list constitutes a definitive prescriptive agenda for my presidency. And I want to be clear that this is not what I intend. I am simply making my first contribution to an ongoing conversation in which every part of the Cornell community is engaged.

Within the sciences, I would begin with the field that has been closest to my own heart since my summers in the 1970's as a computer programmer at the National Institutes of Health. Progress in information science and computing technology has produced fundamental change in dozens of other disciplines while revolutionizing the material circumstances under which we live.

I think also of the post-genomic life sciences, a field where all of the great universities are committing tremendous energies. Cornell's unique

ability to combine insights from the worlds of agriculture, veterinary science, and human medicine suggests that we have a special opportunity to make transformative contributions.

And I think also of the worlds of microfabrication and nanotechnology. It has been almost 43 years since Richard Feynmann gave his now legendary talk, imagining a world in which people could manipulate things on a very small scale. And during that time period Cornell has been a leader in making that imagined world more real, and it is obvious that this leadership will continue.

But other domains cry out for insights as well. To see one domain one need look no farther than the racks of bestselling popular fiction. Michael Crichton's newest page-turner is entitled "Prey." It is mostly an adventure story, but to the extent it works as fiction it does so because it builds upon a very real question. How well are human cultures adapting to scientific and technological progress? Are our social institutions able to meet the challenges and manage the risks that scientific understanding makes possible?

In his day, Andrew Dickson White was concerned with the relationship between technology and the organizing structures of society. In the last century, the awesome potential of nuclear fission challenged our capacity to keep up. In the coming century I believe that great universities like Cornell will offer leadership in helping our cultural and political institutions to keep pace with rapid technological change.

Another domain has its roots in difference. Throughout human history two ways of subdividing people into groups have been especially powerful stimuli for conflict, mistrust, segregation, and war. I am thinking here of the categories of race and religion. And as we look at our world today, it seems that the dangers of racialized and religious wars remain enormous.

I believe that the great universities have much to teach us about how humanity can transcend these boundaries without eliminating them. How people of different races and religions can live collaboratively and cooperatively. Not without tension and stress. But without violence and war. This country has a great reservoir of history to draw on as we seek

insights. This university has an extraordinary history to draw on, one that ranges from boundary-shattering progress to violent confrontation. All of that history, good and bad, provides fodder for future intellectual contributions at Cornell.

The last domain I have time to mention today concerns the impact of a globalized economic and political culture on human society. Cornell's ambition is to contribute to our students. To our cherished local community. To the state of New York. To our nation. And to the world. And today, the boundaries between local and global are dissolving. Ours is a transnational world, and we must continue to recognize that. Today Cornell is in every county of New York State. Cornell is in Ithaca. Cornell is in New York City. Cornell is in Washington, D.C. Cornell is in Doha. In the years to come we must consider whether more of Cornell needs to be in Beijing and Brussels. And we must consider how best to ensure that Tokyo and Paris and Buenos Aires are here with us in Ithaca.

We owe an enormous debt to the giants on whose shoulders we stand. We have a duty to resist the temptations of complacency and self-satisfaction. Cornell's destiny can be to help human society achieve a new equilibrium in which cultural and material life is of universally high quality, sustainable, and secure. But we cannot take that destiny for granted.

I am humbled to have been chosen to return to the Hill to help us all prepare for our sesquicentennial in this way. I plan to work closely with Hunter and with all of you to prepare my return next summer. And I am excited to think of what we will all be able to accomplish together.

Thank you.