

PRESIDENT FORD'S PREPARED REMARKS

October 13, 2006



Dedication of Weill Hall
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy

Delivered by Steve Ford

When your heart is as full as mine is today, the words don't come easily – and not just because I got a C in my freshman English composition class! In truth, it is hard to put into words my feelings of gratitude to Sandy and Joan Weill, whose personal generosity is matched only by their commitment to public service. The same holds true for Walter and Leonore Annenberg, dear friends of the Fords, who also happen to be among the best friends American education has ever had. Many other donors deserve recognition, as do President Coleman, Dean Blank, the architect and contractors and everyone who has played a part in establishing this school and building Weill Hall. I am deeply moved by the presence of so many friends and colleagues who have taken time from their own busy lives to be here.

For me, today offers the memory of a lifetime. I trust you will understand if I take a moment to thank Betty and the children, the grandchildren and – yes, the great grandchildren - for a lifetime of memories. Two days from now, Betty and I will celebrate our 58th wedding anniversary. In a long and richly blessed life, she is the greatest of all my blessings. While my name may be on this school, I am here today because in October, 1948 she decided to take a chance on an old Wolverine and aspiring politician.

There may be no greater honor than to have a school bear your name. Such recognition means all the more when it comes from an institution that you love, and when it is dedicated – not to me personally – but to the cause of public service to which I have devoted most of my life.

Whoever said - you can't go home again - has never been to Ann Arbor. Exactly 75 years have passed since I first walked down State Street. I felt instantly at home, a feeling which has never left me. Like many of you, I am a Midwesterner by birth and instinct. I am a plainspoken man, who has never forgotten the rules first imparted to me as a boy by my parents: Tell the truth, work hard, and come to dinner on time. Not a very sophisticated philosophy, and hardly the stuff of quantitative analysis with which today's faculty weigh complex issues of public policy. But amidst all the theoretical rigor of the classroom, I hope we never forget that the science of politics is inseparable from the needs of people.

The forerunner of this school – the old Institute of Public Administration – entered this world about the same time I did. Woodrow Wilson happened to be in the White House. The only political scientist ever to occupy the presidency, Wilson understood that leadership entailed inspiration as well as administration.

“Just what is it that America stands for?” he asked. “If she stands for one thing more than another it is for the sovereignty of self-governing people.” If politics is a science, I am tempted to add, it is also an art, a vocation, and a passion of a lifetime. There is something else that Wilson, the professor turned politician, told his countrymen. Something worth repeating in times like our own, when cynicism is rampant and the very term “public servant” is held up to scorn.

“We grow great by dreams,” said Wilson. “All big men are dreamers. They see things in the soft haze of a spring day or in the red fire of a long winter's evening. Some of us let these dreams die, but others nourish and protect them; nurse them through bad

days till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who hope that their dreams will come true.”

Long before the American Dream, there was the dream of America – of a land where men and minds were unfettered; a place in which everyone should be able to get ahead, and no one should be left behind. A country whose power was moral as well as military, and whose politics reflected both the diversity and the decency of its people.

It is an old dream – yet it is renewed with every graduating class, and every act of political courage. In this era of spin and sound bites of raised voices and clenched fists - it is easy to throw up one’s hands in exasperation or disgust. But whoever said that democracy is easy?

Take it from one who has experienced more than his share of history, including two world wars, a Great Depression, the trauma of Watergate, and the tragedy of Vietnam. It is precisely because I have seen so much of our past, that I entertain no doubts about our future. Seventy-five years ago I learned to see possibilities where others saw only problems; to celebrate America – not uncritically – but as a work in progress, imperfect as each of us is imperfect, yet striving always to do better, become more just, and fulfill at last the promises we made to one another as an infant republic held together by a dream of democratic self government.

My fondest wish is that you never cease to dream, and that you never yield to the counsels of despair or expediency. For the ultimate test of leadership is not the polls you take, but the risks you take. In the short run, some risks prove overwhelming. Political courage can, for the moment, be self-defeating. But the greatest defeat of all would be to live without courage – for that would hardly be living at all.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

May God bless you all. And may God bless America.