

A speech for the faculty on the state of the university - Sept. 1979

Good afternoon, and welcome to What's My Line?

I'm Laurel Loftsgard, and with any luck we will be spending a good part of the coming year together. I thought it might be a good idea for us to meet for a few minutes this afternoon so I could bring you up to date on some perceptions of reality viewed from Old Main

I suppose if I were truly democratic I would offer you ^{equal time} ~~the opportunity~~ for a rebuttal, but there hardly seems time for that this afternoon. ~~And I'm not so sure it's a good idea anyway.~~ In the fine tradition of the first meetings of classes, I'll try not to keep you for the full hour.

First, I want to say a word of welcome to those who are new to our ranks. We sincerely hope your stay with us will be a mutually rewarding one. We need you. We are happy to have you here. Nowadays, with the job market being what it is, I think we are getting some very impressive new people on our staff--people who had to battle much stiffer competition than many of us did at the time we were hired.

And to those who were gone during the summer, welcome back. We've tried not to let the place come apart in your absence, but it hasn't been easy. We're glad you're back.

Lastly, to those stalwart souls who are here on a 12-month basis, welcome to the start of the race again. It's always surprising to me, how the

atmosphere of ^{the campus} ~~this place~~ changes during the course of a year. The last week in August it's like a plantation in the hands of its caretakers. ^{Then} One day after Labor Day pandemonium strikes and it is charged with electricity and vitality. It is a very energizing thing. At times like this I'm ~~always~~ glad I work in higher education.

Before I embark on a review of some of the highlights of the year just past and some predictions of what appears to be on the horizon, I want to share with you some observations by a couple of fellow university presidents, one of whom has been in the business much longer than I have, and another who is practically brand new.

The first man is Professor Bartlett Giamatti, a former English professor who, on July 1 became the new president of Yale. The New York Times carried an interview with him in which he was asked whether he agreed with Robert Hutchins' description of a university as a collection of independent departments linked by a common heating system (I've also heard it referred to as a sewer system, but I'll defer to the Times' passion for accuracy). ~~At any rate~~, Giamatti said he did not agree with Hutchins and that he had always thought of a true university as being more like a swamp, an ecosystem in which everything is dependent on everything else. So welcome to Camp Swampy, fellow frogs, tadpoles and paramecia.

The second comrade in arms ^{upon} whose wisdom I ^{I want} ~~would like~~ to draw ~~upon~~ is Father Theodore Hesburgh, who has been president of Notre Dame for 25 years. In an article entitled "The College Presidency: Life Between a Rock and a Hard Place." Here are a few of his cogent observations:

"Every day of every year, a president must prove himself to the faculty . . . there is no such thing as a completely cordial and trusting relationship. The president is, in some sense, the symbolic adversary, since he is ultimately the bearer of whatever bad news comes to the faculty. . .

(In a university) there is no leadership by edict. All faculty consider themselves (the president's) equal, if not his better, intellectually. Persuasion is the best method of leadership where the faculty is involved.

And finally,

The normal faculty criticisms of a president are many and varied, often contradictory. If he is always home, he is a nobody; if he is often away, he is neglecting his homework. If he spends little time with faculty he is aloof; if he spends much time with them, he is interfering in their proper business. If he balances his budget, he is stingy; if he cannot balance the budget, he is irresponsible and incompetent. If he is big on retirement benefits the younger faculty can't meet their expenses; if he stresses faculty raises, the older faculty are impoverished on retirement. If he spends much time on fund raising he is a huckster; if he doesn't the financial situation gets worse. In a word, it is Scylla and Charybdis every day. We might as well admit that, willy-nilly, the president will always be between a rock and a hard place.

Well, from my own observations, there is truth in what Father Hesburgh says, but it's not that bad. In fact it's really pretty good. And even he is willing to admit that, saying, "All the normal and natural tensions between good faculty and good administration can in themselves produce an unusually good

sybiotic effect--better governance by mutual understanding of the tasks proper to each."

My point in relating this is not to elicit your sympathy. Envy perhaps, but not sympathy. Being a president is a good job, a very good job with a lot of perquisites that don't come with other lines of employment. I like it, I like it a lot, and I feel very humble about having had the privilege as long as I have.

The point is that practically all of the indications are that we are entering upon a new era for higher education, one that promises some tough new problems that we haven't had to face up to in many years. In a sense, higher education in America has been living off the baby fat of the land since World War II.

For the most part, we have been living very well. The job market has been a seller's market for folks in the teaching profession. It ~~was~~ ^{is} a profession of high mobility where the best people could practically write their own tickets and even the moderately good ones could do all right. Our customers came in ever increasing numbers, keeping well ahead of our capacity to accommodate them. Faculty salaries, though they haven't kept pace with many other professions, by and large were livable at least. Most of us weren't living in genteel poverty. And public confidence in the value of higher education was perhaps at an all-time high.

Well, is all of this coming to an end? Of course we certainly hope not. We do know, however, that the sheer numbers of high school graduates are significantly down, for the first time in the past three decades. That's a fact that we're going to have to adjust to well into the foreseeable future.

Beyond that, there is a feeling that public confidence in higher education as the solver of all human problems appears to have ebbed a bit. That could be a blessing in disguise. Perhaps we'll be able to go back to doing what we started out to do in the first place--educating people, rather than trying to be a panacea to all of society's ills. Yet we do need a very strong measure of public confidence and support if we are to get on with the tasks at hand. It's important that we don't let it erode any further if we can help it.

Fortunately, I'm convinced NDSU has a large reservoir of public confidence in North Dakota.

A The third overwhelming factor with which we're going to have to contend is the nation's economy in general and our state's economy in particular. On the national scene, the picture doesn't look good. I think most honest economists (and all economists are honest, of course, just a little confused at times) are aware that the United States has some extremely grave problems to cope with, economically. I guess all of us know generally what they are--energy, inflation, geopolitics and all of the concomittant ills that accompany them. They are not problems that lend themselves to neat, clean, quick solutions. Well, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. You remember what Father Hesburgh said about faculty being the president's intellectual equals or superiors.

And But the so-called hard place in all of this for us in higher education in general and NDSU in particular, is how to adapt to this new set of circumstances that surround us in a positive way, that will sustain the momentum set in motion during the growth years, build upon the good things that were accomplished, and continue to

improve on those that need improvement. All of us would agree, I think, that there is scarcely an area at NDSU that couldn't stand some improvement-- class size, physical facilities, faculty development and evaluation, administrative procedures, support for research--you name it and there is ample room for improvement. That's good, ^{I hope} and it will probably always be with us.

^{Because} The day we're completely satisfied with everything we're doing will be the day we fall into total stagnation.

Recently, all of us who are presidents of a North Dakota college or university received a memorandum from Commissioner Alm in Bismarck, asking each of us to prepare a statement of personal goals for the institutions which we head, to be used in an informal evaluation of our progress. I thought about that a long time and talked it over with a few fellow denizens of the campus. The conclusion we came to was pretty much what I've just told you--that as long as I'm in a position to do so, NDSU will strive to sustain what it has accomplished, and to build on that and to strengthen the programs we already have--whether we're talking about the faculty, the physical plant, functioning of the administrative units, student services, the curriculum, the football team or our relations with statewide constituencies.

Beyond that, however, there is one other important goal that I stressed. That's having the flexibility to move in the directions we feel we have to move in order to accomplish the other goals. If we don't have that, ^{flexibility} we're in trouble.

There is a man named Herman Kahn, of whom some of you may know, who bills himself as a futurist. He's not President Carter's inflation fighter,

he's another Kahn. In an interview in a national news magazine, he is quoted as saying the 1980s will be "sobering years, years of reduced expectations for Americans." He bases that prediction on what he feels is evidence that the United States has less flexibility than it used to have in responding to national crises. That, he attributes to such factors as worldwide fluctuations in economic power, over which we have practically no control, but which influence our destiny greatly; to a firmly entrenched bureaucracy in our country; ^{such} to ~~the~~ influence of big labor; ^{and the countervailing forces of big business and big government} to our own rapidly depleting supplies of energy ^{and} and other natural resources.

John Kenneth Galbraith, another famous phrasemaker, has dubbed our current times as "the Age of Uncertainty." ^{Monday} And I think most of us sense what he's talking about.

Well, what has all of this to do with your job and mine? How are these sobering years of reduced expectations and uncertainty going to affect those of us in the trenches--profoundly, I am sure.

ⁿ ~~The~~ ^{the} next obvious question of ^{becomes} ~~course~~: How are we going to respond?

Let's bring it down to the day-to-day working level.

1978-79 was a good year for North Dakota State University. Our enrollment remained stable in most areas and increased quite dramatically in some. Our faculty numbers increased. We raised more than two million dollars in outside, private support, toward a new Music Education Center, which, in turn, helped immensely to trigger an additional three-million dollar appropriation for the

the same structure from the North Dakota State Legislature. We had been working toward that goal for more than a decade, and those of us who were involved with that project felt very good about what happened. Our physical plant also grew with the addition of Hultz Hall last October, as did our facilities for research. Our new library addition is almost ready to come on line and we have new greenhouses slated to be built in the very near future. Faculty salaries were granted a modest, though far from adequate increase, but coupled with an expansion of health care coverage, constituted, we felt, significant progress. So on balance, though there were problems left unsolved, we did take a good step forward.

What about the year ahead? This is a non-legislative year, so we're going to get a breather from those flying, midnight trips to Bismarck. But this is the time to get our ducks in a row for the session a year from now. We know from past experience that we have our work cut out for us.

Obviously, one ^{very} ~~terribly~~ vital concern will be salaries. At the rate at which inflation has eroded faculty salaries since our 11.9 percent catch-up raise three years ago, we are probably back to where we were before that. So there is absolutely no question about it. We are going to have to mount a major campaign, amply supported with graphs, charts and statistics, to get a substantial increase in faculty salaries.

Fortunately, the economy of the state of North Dakota is relatively healthy right now. If that situation continues, it is obviously going to help. But I have one word of caution. From our experience in working with legislators,

and we're getting to know some of them fairly well by now, it's not going to be enough just to make what, for us, seems a logical, convincing case for salary increases. They are political animals, who vote the way they perceive their constituencies want them to vote. That's the way it's supposed to work. By and large, we've found many legislators to be remarkably enlightened and, at times, downright courageous in supporting higher education. But if we want their continuing support and cooperation we have to give them the ammunition to work with. Where does that ammunition come from? From alumni who feel good about the education they received in our classrooms. From parents, who feel good about the education their offspring received. From the users of extension services who feel the taxpayers got more than their money's worth. From the supporters of both basic and applied research, who sense that those folks down at NDSU really know what they're about.

Is this a naive perception of reality? Perhaps, to some degree. Oftentimes people's political views defy any measure of rationality. And there are other strong pressures that are brought to bear on the legislative process--offers that legislators have a very tough time refusing. ^{And} ~~We have~~ ^{try} tried very hard not to be naive in dealing with legislators. We try to see it from their point of view.

~~Somewhat peripherally related to that, I want to say a few words about faculty research activity.~~ In my talk to you last year, I put considerable emphasis on the importance of teaching undergraduates. I'll ^{stand} ~~still~~ stand by that.

If we're ~~not~~ ^{don't} performing effectively, ^{and successfully} in the undergraduate classroom and in advising, job placement and all other factors related to educating undergraduates, our institution is weak at its core. None of ^{the other things we do} our other activities are likely to ^{carry much credibility} fly successfully either. But I very much agree with Don Schwartz and others ^{those} who pointed out to me after last year's talk, that a university professor's responsibilities don't end when he walks out the door of a class. Be it sponsored or unsponsored research, public service or a wide range of other scholarly activity, all are an expected and inextricable ingredient ^{S of} in the university professor's professional life. Don ^{Schwartz has} points out that the public image of a university is often shockingly narrow, ^{ed to be} assuming it is little more than an overgrown high school, except that the teachers don't teach as much. There is some validity to what he says. In communicating with the public, we have an immense task in helping people become more aware of the breadth and scope of professorial activity.

Researchers, I'm afraid, all too often fall victim to the public's inability ^{comprehend} to understand what they do and and appreciate its value. That brings people like Senator Proxmire and Johnny Carson out of the woodwork to hold them up to public ridicule. As all of us know, it is often extremely difficult to describe ^{thing} a research project ^S in layman's terms and have it make any sense. We have a ^{from} very real responsibility for doing a better job of ^{on our hands in} communicating to the public ^{So} the value of scholarly research. ^{such} In a very real sense, ^{such} scholarly research ^{much} does constitute the lifeblood of university teaching, and beyond that, fulfills the vital function of generating new knowledge.

As I look to the year ahead, therefore, what I see from an admittedly somewhat channelized point of view, is a year filled with some tough problems and some fascinating opportunities.

We're going to be losing some very good people. Dave Worden, who has performed yeoman service for us in the academic vice presidency, will be leaving before the month is out. We have relied upon him greatly for wise and fair-minded shepherding of our academic programs and he has performed in that role with distinction. His shoes are going to be very difficult to fill.

And we're losing Kathryn Burgum at the end of the calendar year. She's another one who parlayed her own considerable leadership skill and personal dynamism into an organization that has gained national attention for the College of Home Economics. Again, her replacement will be one of the key appointments we have to face up to in the year ahead.

Fortunately, our enrollment is up again this year, so we are starting it off on a positive note. I'm optimistic about it and looking forward to the challenges. We may very well be between a rock and a hard place as far as national and international trends are concerned. ^{But} And in the words of Father Hesburgh, if we can keep some of those "normal and natural tensions going on between a good faculty and a good administration" I think we can have a very satisfying year.

Thank you all for coming and for your attention. Let's adjourn now to the flower garden and communicate with one another a bit less formally.